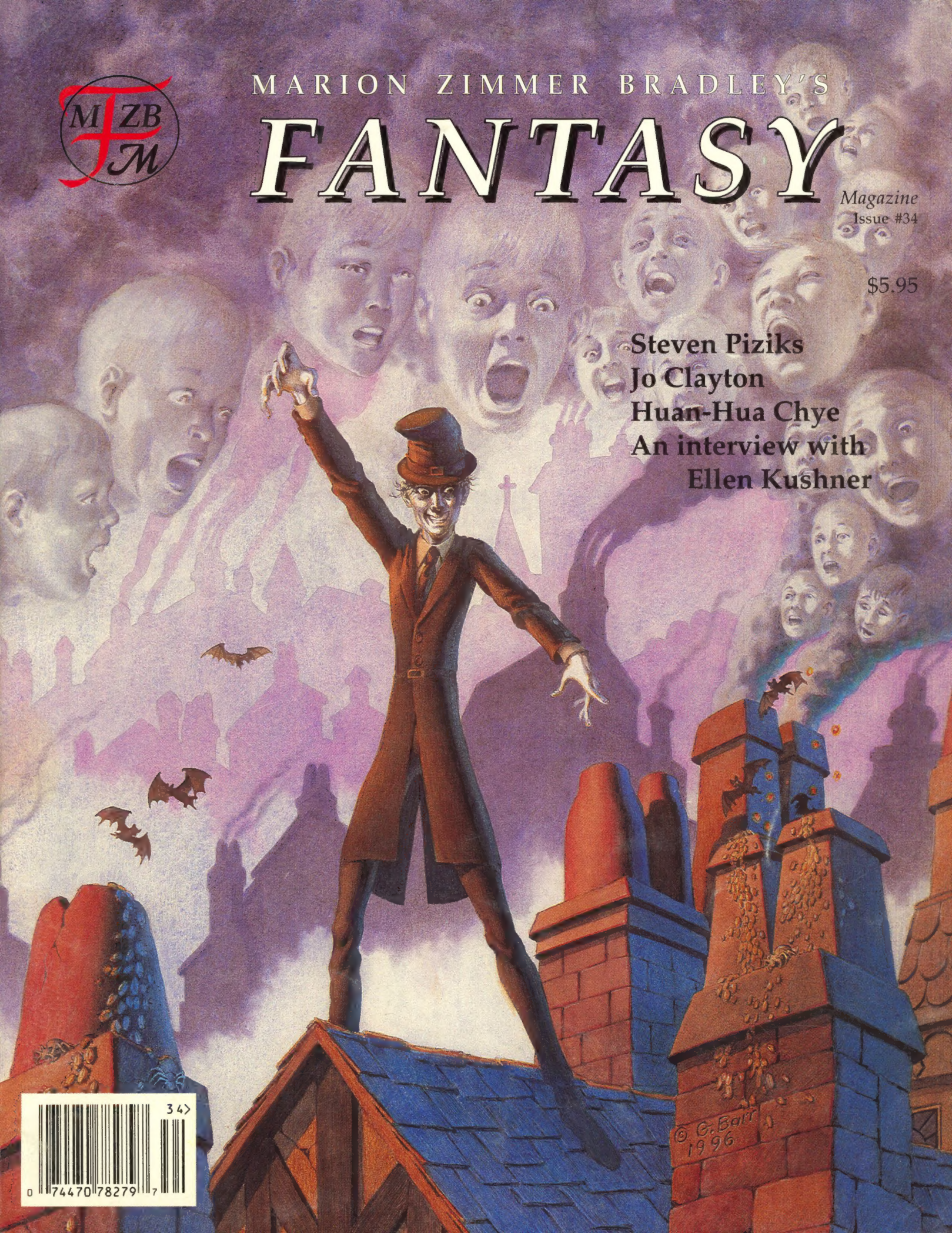
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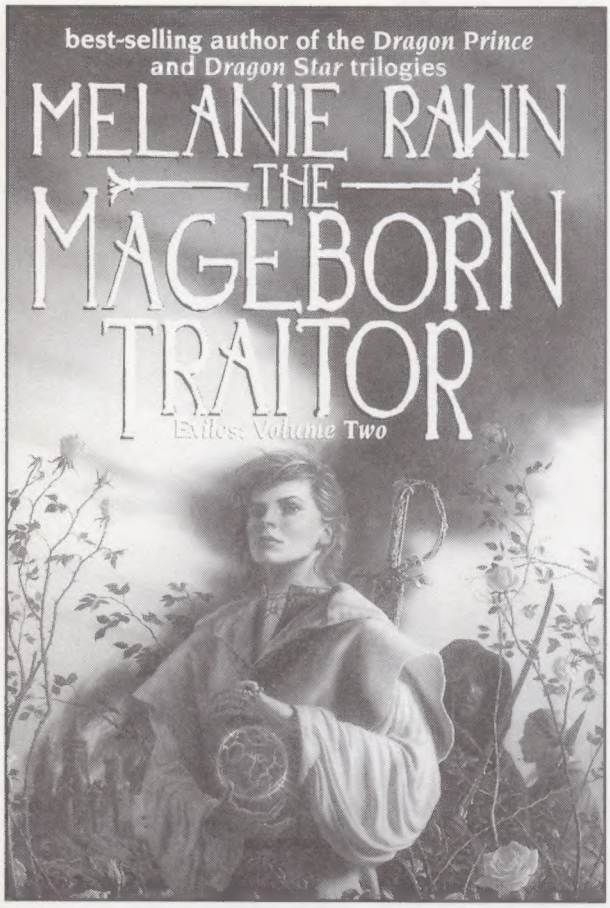
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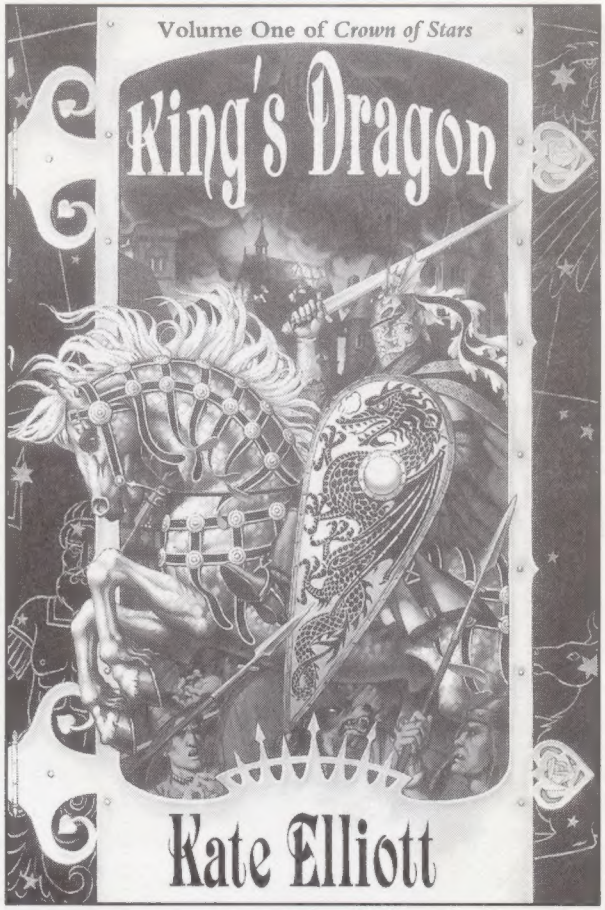

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY
Magazine

EDITORIAL

Funny. I thought I had a couple of dozen editorials lying about the office somewhere. But here comes Rachel to order up an editorial and telling me about our latest circulation increase.

So I say: Welcome to all the renewal subscriptions, and to all the nice new subscribers from our latest mailing (based on the subscription list, I believe, from the Science Fiction Book Club).

I hope that all these new subscriptions will allow us to bring you more of the types of stories and artwork that you have come to expect from a first class fantasy magazine. Please write to us regarding your opinion of the stories, the magazine, or fantasy writing in general. I read every letter that comes in, and we all take your opinions and comments seriously. We want to provide you, our readers, with the types of stories that you want to read, stories that will appeal to your imaginations.

A major problem for small press publications is that many well-thought-of writers will not send us their work, in spite of my policy of inviting them them to submit to us, and of paying professional rates, and even giving them input in the artwork. When I ask why, they say they feel that we are too small a market to give them a realistic chance at either a Hugo or a Nebula. Despite that, quite a few well-known writers have sent us their work, and I thank them all. C.J. Cherryh, Mercedes Lackey, Madeline L'Engle, Roberta Gellis, Poul *and* Karen Anderson, Tanya Huff, Jennifer Roberson, and Fritz Leiber are just a few of our Stellar Constellation.

To this I have nothing to say other than that I don't feel a writer should do his work with an eye on the awards. I never have, and of course that may be one of the reasons why a writer of my status has never won either a Hugo or a Nebula. As if the value of a writer could be measured by awards!

I have always had a love/hate relationship with SFWA anyhow. I feel that a writer's organization should have more to do than hand each other awards. To be fair, SFWA does a lot more. The Grievance Committee fights for writer's rights in general, and the Emergency Medical fund has helped many writers work though a period of illness when funds ran low.

Some of you may have some good ideas. Let's hear from you.

Marion Zimmer Bradley

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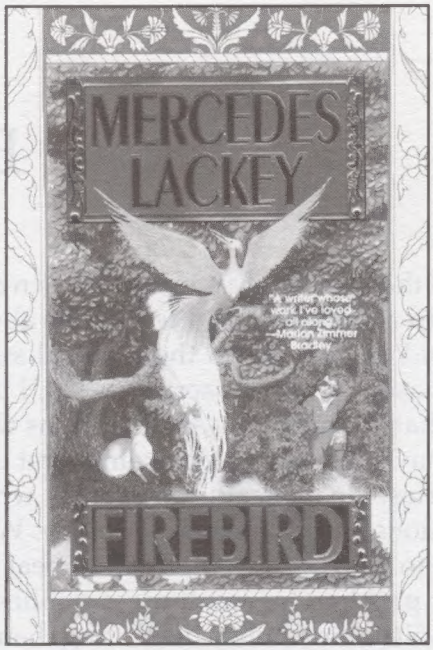

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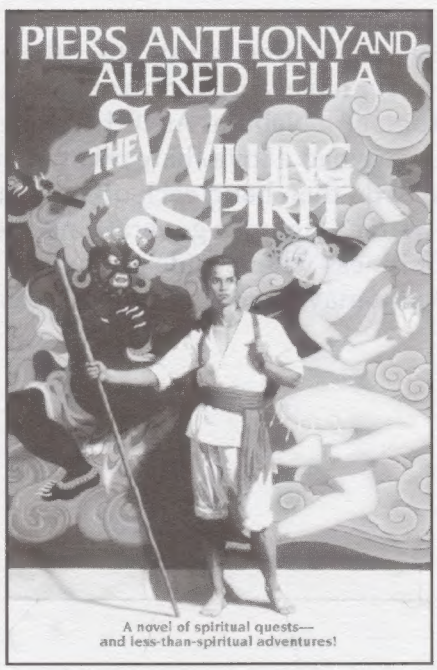

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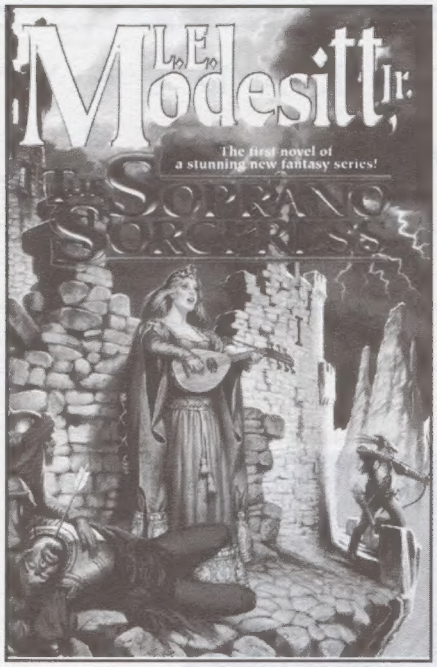

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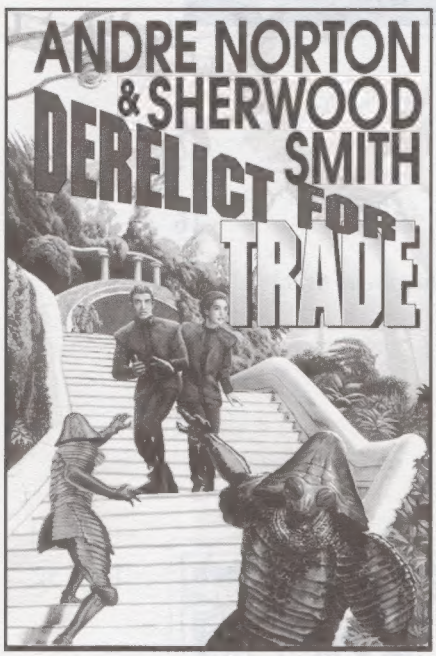

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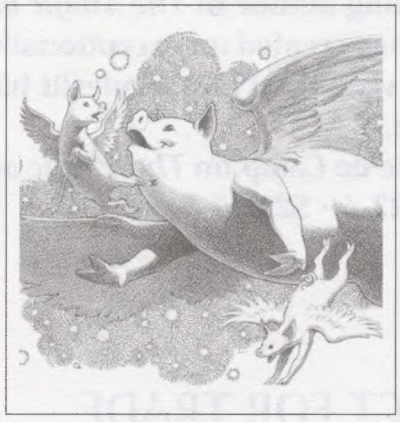

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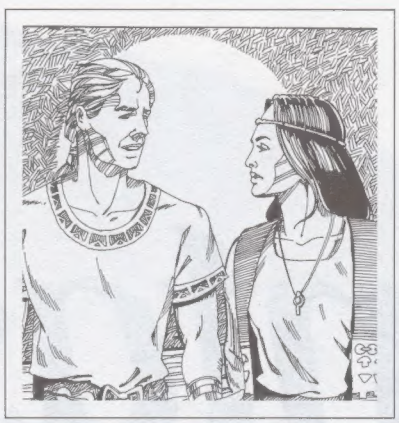

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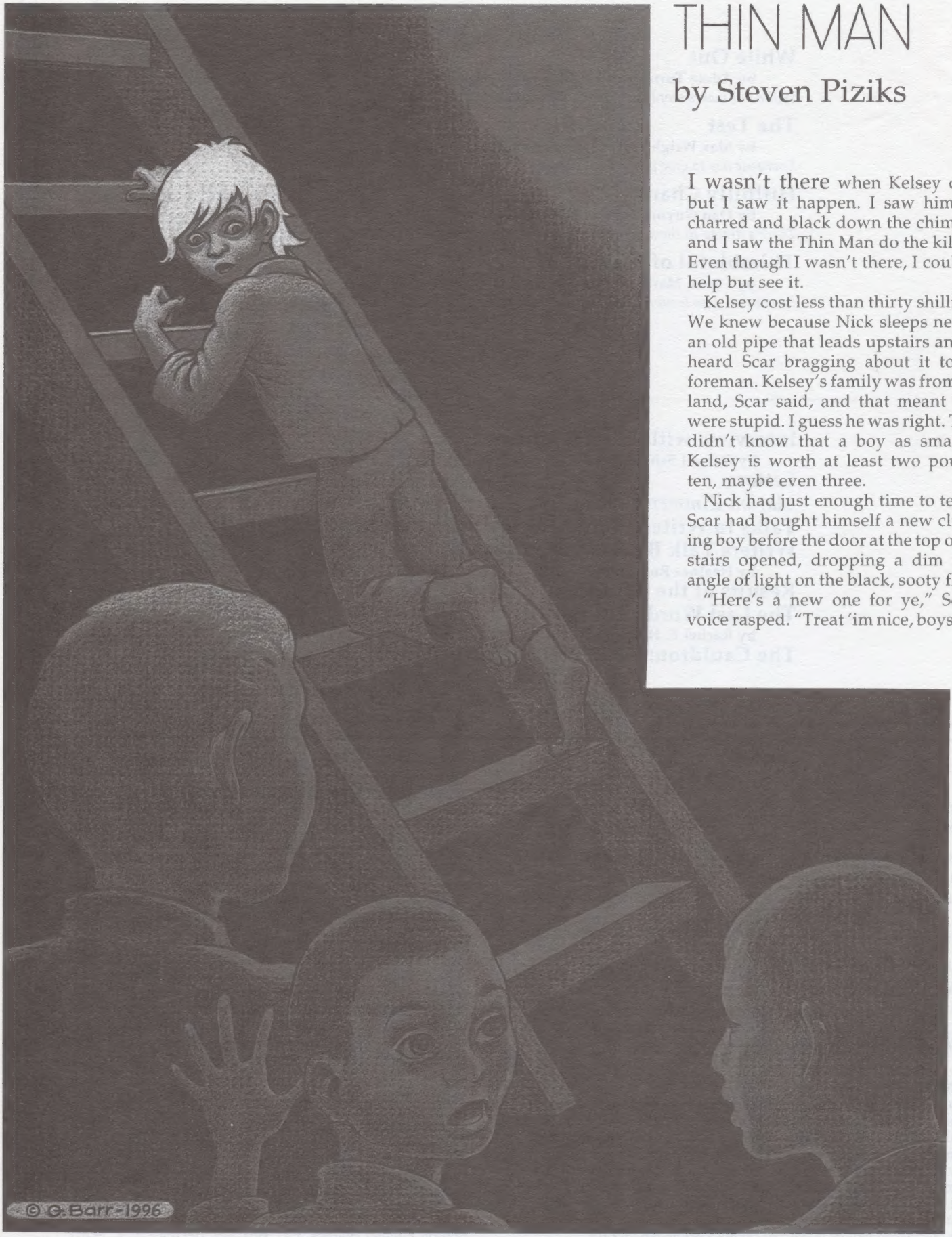


Artwork by George Barr

THIN MAN

by Steven Piziks

I wasn't there when Kelsey died, but I saw it happen. I saw him fall charred and black down the chimney, and I saw the Thin Man do the killing. Even though I wasn't there, I couldn't help but see it.

Kelsey cost less than thirty shillings. We knew because Nick sleeps next to an old pipe that leads upstairs and he heard Scar bragging about it to the foreman. Kelsey's family was from Ireland, Scar said, and that meant they were stupid. I guess he was right. They didn't know that a boy as small as Kelsey is worth at least two pounds ten, maybe even three.

Nick had just enough time to tell us Scar had bought himself a new climbing boy before the door at the top of the stairs opened, dropping a dim rectangle of light on the black, sooty floor.

"Here's a new one for ye," Scar's voice rasped. "Treat 'im nice, boys. We

got a big job come mornin'."

The door slammed shut and the cellar went dark. Uncertain feet shuffled on the staircase.

"Come on down, then," Nick called. Nick wasn't the oldest — I was ten and Jim was eleven — but he was still leader because he was faster than Jim and his fists were harder.

Feet bumped softly to the bottom of the stairs as Kelsey descended into the soot-black cellar. He was small, like all climbing boys, with blue eyes and a full head of white hair. I was the only one who could see him. I have six fingers on my left hand, so I can see in the dark. Or maybe I can see in the dark, so I have six fingers on my left hand.

"It's all right," Nick's voice said. "We ain't going to hurt you. My name's Nick. What's yours?"

"Kelsey." His voice was small and firm. "I'm four."

"You ever climb before, Kelsey?" Nick asked.

"No."

"You'll learn, and right quick," Jim put in. "Less'n you wants a fire underneath or hatpins in your arse. And then there's the Thin Man."

"Shut it, Jim," Nick snapped. "Kelsey, there's six of us down here — Dodd, Jim, Brick, Kit, Rafe, and me. Say `hello' boys."

A chorus of "hello's" and "evenin's" filled the ash cellar, followed by a bout of coughing that echoed against the stone walls. Scar's cellar was cool in summer and cold in winter, but the soot kept us passably warm. It made a soft blanket, almost like gray silk, unless you breathed too hard. Then it turned on you and clotted the breath in your lungs.

"I'm the leader," Nick continued, "and don't you forget it. How'd Scar bring you in?"

"Who's Scar?" Kelsey asked.

"His name's John Scarsdale," Brick said. There was a familiar clanking as he rearranged his poke. "We calls him Scar 'cause of his looks. But don't tell *him* that."

"Mum tol' me to go with Scar," Kelsey said. "She said Scar'd give me more food'n she could."

Nick snorted. "Well, find yourself a place on the floor and get some sleep. We gets up early."

A pause, then a rustling sound. I coughed once or twice and settled back down into my soot pile, glad that Kelsey was one of the quiet ones. New boys are usually scared or angry, especially if their parents sold them or they were orphans from the church.

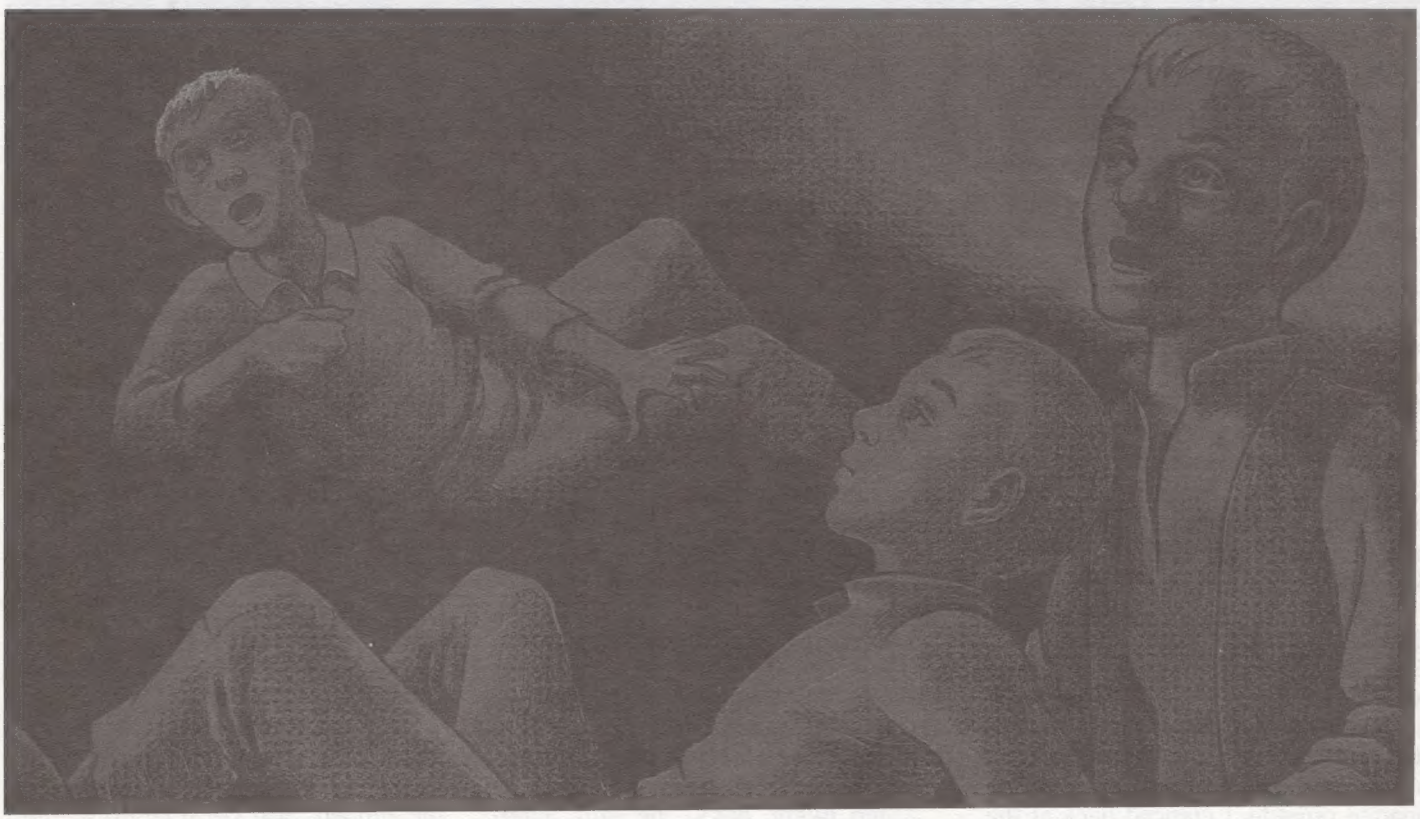
The next morning when the foreman came downstairs with his lamp to shout us awake, Kelsey was lying curled up in a pile of ashes with his thumb in his mouth. His face was already gray with soot but there were no tear tracks on his cheeks.

"Up with ye!" the foreman bellowed. "Let's move!"

We moved — the foreman always carried a carriage whip. Little Kelsey scrambled to his feet along with us. His hair was still white and I wondered why it wasn't gray with soot like the rest of him.

The foreman herded us upstairs, burlap pokes clanking and thumping rough against our backs. Scar waited in the chilly kitchen with a scissors. Without a word he picked Kelsey up, dropped him into a chair, and started cutting off his hair. Kelsey sat motionless for a moment, mouth open. Then he screamed. The foreman promptly smashed Kelsey's face with a fist. Kelsey slumped and his eyes slid half shut.

"Shut it, boy," the foreman growled. "None of our boys is lousy and you ain't gonna be the first."



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Scar went back to his cutting. Long hanks of white dropped to the floor and they gleamed in the dim lamplight. I stared at them. I didn't know why, but those hanks of hair were the most beautiful things I had ever seen. The others stood by, coughing and hoping it wouldn't get worse for Kelsey. There was nothing else to do.

When Scar was finished, Kelsey's hair was so short he looked bald. There were cuts and scratches all over his head and I winced. They'd be red and dirty by the end of the day.

"All right, let's go," Scar said. "No time for breakfast — we're late enough. Give the new one a poke, Harv, and we'll be off."

The foreman yanked Kelsey out of the chair and threw a sooty cap and one of the extra pokes at him. As everyone headed outside, I glanced back at the soft silver lying on the floor by the chair and all of a sudden I couldn't leave it in that cold, dark kitchen. No one else was looking. I dashed back and scooped up a handful. It was soft and caught the ridges of my hands. I had never felt anything like it. I stuffed the hair in my pocket and had grabbed another handful when the foreman noticed I was missing. He stomped back into the kitchen just as I shoved the second handful in with the first.

"What are ye waitin' on?" He thumped me on the ear and I saw stars. "Slacking off?"

I stumbled out the door. It was still dark outside. My bare feet came down on cold, hard cobblestones, and a nip in the air said summer was over. Scar was waiting impatiently with the horse and cart.

"Step lively, boys," he said, snapping the reins. "We've got a ways to go."

We headed up the street, past crumbling houses stacked together like old boxes and around piles of stinking rubbish. Nick cleared his throat.

"Sweep!" he yelled. "Sweep! Sweep!"

"Sweep!" the rest of us shouted. "Sweep! Sweep!"

Scar and the foreman ignored the noise and Kelsey trudged along beside Nick without joining it. Eventually Nick laid off yelling and asked him what was wrong.

"Mr. Scar cut me hair off," he said softly. "I'm scared."

"Scared?" Nick asked. He sounded surprised. I know I was.

"Mum said white hair like mine's a gift from the angels," Kelsey replied miserably. "She said it'd be p'tecting me, but Mr. Scar cut it all off an' now

I'm scared."

I fingered the soft hanks in my pocket. ("Sweep! Sweep!")

Jim turned round, eyes glittering. "Scared the Thin Man's going to get ye? He will, ye know. He hides in the flues. He's got long bony fingers, he has, and he c'n get through the tightest places. He'll suck the livin' breath right out of —"

"Shut it, Jim!" Nick ordered.

("Sweep! Sweep!")

"There's no such thing as the Thin Man," Kit scoffed quickly. Rafe coughed and nodded hard, like he could make his brother's words more true. Rafe believed in the Thin Man more than anyone. Anyone, that is, but me.

Oh yes — the Thin Man *is* real. I know. I heard him chuckling in the dark when flames rushed up Pete's flue and roasted him alive. I saw the tail of his coat disappear up a fireplace just before Will reached his chimney pot and the mortar gave way, dropping him and the top of the chimney five stories to a stone courtyard.

("Sweep! Sweep!")

Once I got stuck in a flue and felt bony fingers stroke my cheek. My mouth went dry and I almost panicked. I struggled for a second, then I was free, trying to catch my breath in the heavy black air of the flue.

I'll let you go this time, little Dodd, whispered a dry voice. *But next time, I might not. Remember that.*

Oh, yes — the Thin Man is real. I know.

I put my left hand in my pocket and stirred Kelsey's silky hair with my sixth finger. I barely remember an old woman — my granny? — holding me on her lap once and twiddling that finger.

"This extra finger means ye'll be seein' extra things, boy," she said. "An' not only will ye see things, ye'll be gettin' extra attention from certain folk, and I don't mean folk like what walks this earth. They'll tell ye things and give ye things and try to make ye do things, but remember — ye allus got a choice, to do or not do for y'rself. Don't forget now, eh?"

I wondered if Kelsey's hair would protect me from the Thin Man. My finger wouldn't.

("Sweep! Sweep!")

I thought about giving Kelsey's hair back to him, but gave it up. Scar or the foreman would see me if I tried it on the job, and they'd take Kelsey's hair away. Climbing boys never owned anything. By law Scar had to pay us sixpence every year, but we always gave it to the foreman. He'd beat us up if we didn't.

We walked almost three miles before Scar halted the cart in front of a big white house with a lot of chimneys poking at the sky like brick fingers. Smoke drifted from one of the chimneys and I bit my lip. So did the others.

"Baker's flue today, boys," Scar said.

We went round to the back and knocked, but the maid who answered flung up her hands.

"No one said nothin' to me 'bout no sweeps coming today," she huffed. "I've already got a good fire goin' in the washroom."

"Ye'll have to put it out," Scar said, nodding at the smoking chimney. "Can't be sending my boys up a flue what's got a fire going in it, can I?"

The maid looked like she wanted to argue, then she nodded abruptly and stomped back into the house, leaving the door open.

"House has twelve flues and nine chimneys," Scar said. "Let's get moving. Dodd, you'll stay with Kelsey and teach 'im what's what. Since the kitchen flues're hot, we'll start with the drawing room."

Inside we realized *someone* had been expecting us — brown butcher paper was laid in pathways all through the house beyond the kitchen. The washing girl was either stupid or never went into the main part of the house. I sighed — the kitchen floor was made of smooth wood. It was almost warm, much nicer than the cold stony street. Scar gestured at us impatiently, and we followed him out of the kitchen, keeping carefully to the brown paths. Paper crunched and crackled like little fires with every step.

The house was a nice one — big rooms with heavy carpets on the floors, paintings on the walls, and curved furniture with soft cushions and brightly-polished wood. I wished I could work there forever, and I knew the others were thinking the same thing, though we tried to act unimpressed. Kelsey, however, stared open-mouthed and I was afraid he would touch something — that would earn all of us a beating — but he kept his hands to himself.

We entered the drawing room, pokes in hand, where another woman was lighting a pair of lamps on the mantle. More paper was laid all round the fireplace.

"Right on time," the woman said briskly. "Good. I'm Mrs. Rutlidge. See that you don't stray from the paper and that —"

"Yes, mum," Scar interrupted. "We know what we're about. Just go about yer work and we'll handle the flues. The washer girl started a fire, though."

The woman sighed and strode for the door. "Fredricka. I told her you were coming today. I'll go make sure she puts it out." And she left.

"Kit, you take this 'un all the way to the top," Scar ordered. "Rafe, you take the drawing room 'til it meets Kit's flue. The rest of you, come with me."

"Dodd!" Kit called before we left, and I dashed over to take a quick look up the flue. It was dark, of course, and it curved twice before ending in a round chimney pot. I saw no bats or loose mortar or hidden embers. It was safe.

"Nothin'," I reported. "Second turn's real tight, though, so watch yourself."

Kit nodded and disappeared up the flue with a middle-sized brush from his poke. He coughed once or twice and the sound echoed eerily up the flue. I trotted off to catch up with the others.

We followed paper paths throughout the first floor. Brick got a flue to himself. Nick and Jim got a double flue — two fireplaces that connected into a single chimney. Nick asked me to check his for him, but I told him all the flues were curved, meaning he and Jim didn't have to worry about corners. Jim just snorted. He never asked me to check his flues. Jim didn't believe I could see anything and he didn't believe in the Thin Man, despite the tales he liked to tell.

Kelsey stayed quiet, watching everything through large blue eyes as we went through the house. I found it unnerving — most climbing boys are either angry or scared on their first day, but I couldn't tell what Kelsey was feeling. He acted more like a doll than a boy. It made me nervous.

"Kitchen and washroom flue oughta be cooled by now," Scar said after Nick and Jim started climbing. "The fire wasn't going long. Come on, the both of ye."

The unease grew stronger. I slipped my six-fingered hand into the pocket and stroked that soft white hair. My eyes met Kelsey's and suddenly I realized he *knew* what I had. I glanced at Scar. The foreman had already gone

Artwork by George Barr

upstairs to climb the roof and wait for us to rattle the chimney pots, but Scar'd see if I tried to give Kelsey anything. We both knew it. But Kelsey just stared at me until I looked away.

The Thin Man's waiting for me and my six fingers, I told myself. *He's not watching Kelsey. I need all the protection I can get.*

"We've smothered the flames in the washroom fireplace," Mrs. Rutlidge said in the kitchen. "But Fredricka doesn't want to put the coals out, and frankly I'm sick to the teeth of arguing with her."

Scar frowned. "Let's have a look."

The washroom smelled like steam and soap. Its fireplace was surprisingly small, barely big enough to heat a decent-sized kettle. Coals glowed redly in the grate.

"I ain't puttin' 'em out," Fredricka said, taking a defiant stand near a washtub. "It'll take a bucket o' water for that, and I won't have wet ashes all over my floor."

"The sweep can't send a boy up with coals burning, girl," Mrs. Rutlidge retorted.

"Not a problem," Scar said suddenly. He took up a lid from the largest kettle and dropped it over the coals. Soot puffed up in a gray cloud. "There now. The real danger, y' see, is the fumes. This here lid'll put a stop to that, and your fire'll even keep until my boy gets finished. How's that?"

Fredricka gave Mrs. Rutlidge a smug look.

"Well and good," Mrs. Rutlidge said with a nod. "That means Fredricka can give us a hand with the upstairs windows."

The smug look fell away and they left the room.

"All right, ye lazy pigs," Scar rasped. "Get climbin'. Dodd, you show the little 'un how and get 'im on this flue. Then you start on the kitchen one. I wants both o' ye to take it to the top. Got me?"

I nodded and took a stiff brush out of my poke. It looked like a floor brush that had a short handle. Kelsey looked at me for a moment, then dug round in his poke until he came up with one like it.

"All right, Kelsey," I said. "Here's what ye do. When ye go up the flue, hold the brush above your head in your right hand like this. Got it? Your left hand, it's useless, so let it hang down like this. Don't *never* put both your arms up or both down or you'll get stuck, right?"

Kelsey just nodded. I could feel him not looking at my pocket. I could also feel Scar's eyes boring into the back of my neck.

"Right," I said. "The real work of climbin' is in your knees an' back. Once you get in the flue, ye presses your knees against the bricks in front of ye and your back against the ones behind. Then ye sort of ootch your way up, scrubbin' with your right hand as ye go. When ye get to the chimney pot at the top, ye rattles it with your brush to tell the foreman you're done. Then ye climbs back down. Got it?"

Kelsey nodded again. The silvery-white hair was heavy in my pocket.

"I'll boost ye up, then," I said, leading him toward the little fireplace. The kettle lid was still covering the coals like an angry black hen sitting on her nest and there was barely enough room for us to stand without touching it. Warmth from the ashes soaked into my bare feet. The flue was narrow — seven

by seven at most.

"Come on," Scar growled. "Ain't got all mornin'."

"I'll be joining you when the flues connect up, Kelsey," I said, lacing my hands together. "Ready?"

"Ye checked flues for the others, Dodd," Kelsey said softly. "Are ye goin' to be checkin' mine?"

I automatically glanced up, and blinked. The flue was *dark*. I couldn't see a thing. Not safe emptiness. Just black space.

"It's ... there's nothing," I almost whispered. "Nothing."

"If someone ain't in that flue by the time I count three," Scar warned, "ye'll find out what `nothing' is. One ... "

"It's all right, Dodd," Kelsey said. "I'm not scared." He stepped into my hands.

"Remember — right hand up, left hand down." I boosted him into the flue, making sure his shoulders were set right and giving him support until he could brace himself against the chimney walls. It was a tight squeeze, and a good thing Kelsey was small for his age.

"And see to it you scrub them bricks good," Scar called, "or I'll give ye the beatin' of your short life."

Kelsey's feet vanished into the dark. I peered up the chimney but still couldn't see a thing. It was confusing.

"You all right, Kelsey?" I asked.

Silence. Then, "The walls is hot."

Baker's flue. I winced. "Just scrub 'em. Ye'll get used to it."

Silence again. After a moment there was the familiar hiss of bristle on brick, and a fine shower of soot sifted into the fireplace. I barely got out of the way.

"It's gettin' all over me," Kelsey's voice echoed from the flue. Then he coughed and I felt better. As long as you could hear the coughing, you knew everything was fine.

"Keep goin'," Scar shouted. "And don't stop 'til ye gets to the top. Got me?"

No answer. Just the hissing scrub of the brush and the coughing. Muttering to himself, Scar hauled me into the kitchen, and practically threw me at the fireplace. I caught my balance against the harsh brick.

"No more slackin'," Scar snapped. "Ye've got your job, too."

Brush in hand, I stepped into the fireplace and looked up. It was strange that I had seen nothing in Kelsey's flue and I wondered what I'd see in mine, it being connected and all.

Nothing. Confusion turned into uneasiness and my hands shook, just a little. The moment I hauled myself into the flue the darkness above me flickered long enough to show a black, skinny figure hanging upside down.

Coming, Dodd? it whispered in a voice as dry as old sticks. *I'm waiting for you.* The Thin Man grinned at me for a horrible moment, then turned like a spider in the narrow flue and skittered upwards.

I lost my grip and dropped back into the fireplace.

"What're ye waitin' on?" Scar hissed in my ear, and I yelped. He smacked me on the head. "I told ye t' *move*, boy!"

"I ... I ..." My breath was coming short and fast and my heart was pounding. "I can't."

Without a word Scar pulled a hatpin from his pocket and drove it downward. Sharp pain pierced my foot. I yelled and Scar stabbed me again.

"*Climb*, ye little bastard!" he bellowed. "Or next time I'll stab yer eye!"

I started to cry — I couldn't help it — and Scar jabbed my other foot. More sharp pain.

"*CLIMB*!" He shoved the bloody pin in my face. "Or do you want t' be half blind like me?"

Pain and fear mixed with the tears on my face as I slowly hauled myself into the flue, five-fingered hand up, six-fingered hand down. The Thin Man was waiting for me and I wouldn't ever come out of that flue again. I wondered how it'd happen. Would I get stuck and suffocate? Or would I lose my grip at the top and fall three stories? Who would check the flues and tell the others what to look out for?

My feet ached as I scooted up the dark flue, carefully bracing knees and back against the rough walls. I don't know if any climbing boy gets used to the work. Hard, unmoving brick surrounds you on four sides and there's wood and plaster outside that. There isn't the tiniest scrap of light because your own body blocks it from below and the chimney pot keeps it out at the top. The ash and soot you scrub from the walls falls down past you, making the air thick and hard to breathe. You can feel the tiny bits being sucked into your lungs. Almost everyone panics once in a while, but that only gets you stuck and makes the panic worse. I was fighting fear already, even though I was barely ten feet up the flue.

"What's going on in here?" came Mrs. Rutlidge's voice from below. "I heard screaming."

"One o' the boys was bein' stubborn," Scar replied. "Had to show 'im who's boss. They forgets if ye don't remind 'em."

"Well keep it down. It's hard enough to keep everyone at task as it is."

I'm here, Dodd, came the dark whisper. I tried to scream, but the flue seemed to get narrower and it was hard to get any air. A half-ton of brick and mortar pressed in on me and I did the one thing you can never do — I tried to run. The rhythm of legs and back shattered and I slipped. With a jolt, my knees jammed themselves almost up to my chin. I was stuck.

You see, Dodd? I'm always here.

I looked up without using my eyes and he was there, hanging upside-down, bony fingers reaching for me. I tried to hit him with my brush, but could barely move my arm.

Don't struggle, Dodd, he hissed. *Soon you'll be with Pete and Will and Deke and John and Cory and all the others. Wouldn't you like that?*

"Go away," I whispered. "Go away!"

The Thin Man chuckled, then rubbed himself against the flue, pouring soot and ash over me. It piled higher and higher on my knees, rising toward my mouth and nose. I coughed and struggled, but still couldn't move.

Come to me, little Dodd. The Thin Man reached down —

— and stopped. He tried to touch my head, but his fingers quit just short of my cap.

"Go away," I said, barely able to get the words out. "Go *away*!"

Who protects you, Dodd? the Thin Man

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Artwork by George Barr

asked. *Who is it?*

He skittered past me down the flue, somehow worming through the cracks and crevices round my body like a cold black spider. I coughed and choked and tried to shrink away from the thin, icy flesh that slid past mine, but I still couldn't move. My legs were cramping up and I could hardly breathe. The Thin Man stared at me from below.

You wear the protection of another. Suddenly he was above me again, looking down with a yellow grin that was wider than a human face. *Well, little Dodd, if I can't feed on you, I'll find someone else, shall I? Perhaps one who has no protection at all?*

My heart almost stopped. Kelsey! He was going to take Kelsey — and it'd be my fault. "No," I croaked. "Please."

Good-bye, little Dodd. One day I'll be back, you may be sure.

"Please," I whispered. "Not Kelsey. He's little."

But the Thin Man was gone. I tried not to look, tried not to see, but I couldn't help it. I knew what was happening as if I were there.

Kelsey was in his flue, scrubbing with his little brush, coughing from the soot that sifted endlessly down the flue and into the fireplace grate. It covered the iron kettle lid that lay over the deep red coals. The Thin Man laughed to himself beneath the lid and he blew gently, ever so gently. The coals glowed like anger. The kettle lid was already warm, but now it grew hot. More soot sifted down from Kelsey's brush and the Thin Man blew harder. A thread of smoke drifted up from the lid less than a second before the soot exploded into flame. Fire roared up the chimney and a horrible scream echoed up and down the flue. It went on and on and I couldn't even put my hands over my ears to shut it out. Kelsey stopped bracing himself against the bricks and his body fell, blackened and charred, until it landed on the kettle lid and burned some more.

And then I was free. My legs somehow found the room to wiggle down and I could move again. I knew I had to get out before the fire spread to my flue, but all I could do was gasp and sob.

A puff of heat moved against my cheek and I forced myself to move downward, careful and quick at the same time. Servants were running frantically through the kitchen to the laundry room and no one noticed one grubby climbing boy drop down from the kitchen flue. Fire fighters arrived and put out the flames before they did much damage to the house. I just collapsed where I was and stayed there until Nick came and got me. We weren't going to finish the house, he said. The owners were going to call another sweep.

I just nodded and pulled a tuft of hair from my pocket. It was still silvery-white even though my fingers were as black as Kelsey's little body. We found out later the police put down that Kelsey had died in an accidental fire and Scar wouldn't have to go to court.

The walk home was quiet. No one shouted "Sweep!"

"You all right, Dodd?" Nick asked that night in the soot cellar. The smell of damp stone mixed with burned wood, and the floor creaked overhead as Scar and the foreman paced and muttered to each other.

I shook my head, trying not to cry again. Kelsey was dead because I had set the Thin Man on him and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

"He's gonna cry about Kelsey," Jim said. "Dodd's gonna cry like a girl."

"You shut it, Jim," Kit said.

"Girl, girl, girl," Jim taunted. "Dodd's a little girl."

"Shut it or me and Rafe'll pound ye," Kit threatened.

"That's right, Dodd," Jim sneered in the dark. "Get someone else t' fight for ye, just like a girl."

And I got really mad. I've never been very big — climbing boys never are — but I wanted to smash Jim's sneering face, the one I could see so clearly in the dark. Except if I did, he'd beat me up and the other boys wouldn't be able to do anything because it'd be my fight. No, I couldn't win with my fists, but there were other ways to hurt him, and I *wanted* to hurt him.

"You ain't worth a fight, Jim," I said quietly. "You're just a coward. You're afraid of Nick, you're afraid of climbin', and you're afraid your dad ain't comin' back to get ye like he promised. Well he ain't comin', Jim. Not ever. I know."

"You don't know nothin'!" Jim said hoarsely. "He got a job in —"

"There weren't no job in Bolton," I interrupted. "That train ticket he showed you was a piece of paper he found on a dustheap."

A scuffle as Jim came to his feet. He was breathing hard. "I never tol' nobody 'bout that ticket," he snarled. "How did —"

"He's still livin' in that rotten old flat and he's got a woman what lives with 'im and they do things all night long. He don't want you, Jim. He don't." I hawked and spat. "I know."

Dead silence. Ash and soot hung in the black air. Finally Jim crept away to a corner of the cellar with his poke. I knew he was crying, even though he never made a sound. It should've made me feel better, but I only felt worse.

The next morning two different inns wanted their chimneys swept at the same time. Since Scar had twice as many climbing boys as any other sweep in town, he took both contracts and split us into two teams. Scar headed off with me and Nick and Jim to do one while the foreman and the others took the other. We had the horse and cart and I was glad of that — we wouldn't have to carry the ashes away ourselves.

"Sweep!" we shouted behind the cart, Jim twice as loud as me and Nick. Jim wouldn't look at me. "Sweep! Sweep!"

"We got four flues what need sweepin'," the innkeeper said when we arrived. He was a solid-looking man with pale blond hair that made me think of Kelsey. I looked away. The main room of the inn was chilly — no fires heated it this morning — and it smelled of roasted meat and stale beer. Sand covered the floor to soak up spills, and it felt gritty between my toes.

"Take about five hours," Scar estimated. "You got paper laid for us?"

I was only listening with half an ear — the main fireplace pulled at me. It was huge and built of fieldstone. I sidled over to it, wanting to look inside and not wanting to. Not that *I* had anything to worry about. I was protected. Then flames crackled in my head and I heard Kelsey screaming again. A hard lump of guilt came to my throat.

"Jim, you'll start with the main flue out here," Scar said. "And be quick — the innkeeper's losin' business."

I checked the flue —

— and saw absolutely nothing. Just like before. All the questions I hadn't let myself think about crashed down on me. Why had I seen nothing in both our flues before Kelsey died? What did it mean? Was it my fault he died like he did? Why hadn't I known what was going to happen?

"Get out o' my way, Dodd," Jim growled behind me. "I don' need ye t' check my flue. You don't know *nothin'*."

Then I did know. The guilty lump rose in my throat again and I bit my thumb so I wouldn't cry. Kelsey's flue had been blank because the Thin Man was supposed to come for me, but nothing had been certain until I had climbed into my own flue. Until that moment, I could've given Kelsey the protection he needed, even if it meant running back to his flue and getting beaten for it. Not even Scar and the foreman would've been able to take it *all* if I had tried to give him some. I was just too afraid to make the choice to do it. Like Jim was afraid.

A blank flue meant the Thin Man was going after someone, but what I did would decide who he'd get.

"I said, get out o' my way," Jim snapped.

I glanced over my shoulder. Scar was talking to the innkeeper, not looking at us. I pulled a soft lock of Kelsey's hair from my pocket and it gleamed silver in the lamplight.

"Put this in your pocket, Jim," I whispered. "Quick!"

"I don't want nothin'," he said without looking at my hand. "Especially not from a six-fingered freak like you."

"Please, Jim," I pleaded. "I ... I'm sorry about what I said last night about the train ticket an' all. I was just makin' it up. You're dad'll come. I know he will. Just take this."

"Piss off," Jim snarled, and he vanished up the flue. I turned away from the fireplace, shaking and scared.

"What's wrong?" Nick asked quietly, keeping a watchful eye on Scar.

"Here," I said, thrusting the lock into Nick's hand. "Put this in your pocket. It's better'n me checkin' your flue."

Nick glanced at what I had given him and did as he was told before Scar could see. "Done. But what — ?"

"Nick!" Scar snapped. "I want you on the kitchen flue. Dodd, you're upstairs. The innkeeper'll show ye where t' start."

And we separated before I could explain. The innkeeper showed me the upstairs fireplace and left. I put my hand in my pocket and stared up the chimney. Empty. Just a black, sooty passage straight up to the roof. The Thin Man must have known I was still protected — he wasn't even there.

On the floor below, I could see Jim scrubbing madly in his flue, coughing under the rain of soot his brush brought down. Nick had just started in the kitchen, but he was coughing, too. Maybe the Thin Man wasn't here today. I concentrated on Nick and Jim's coughing, trying to make myself feel better. As long as you could hear the coughing, you knew everything was fine.

Then I heard the Thin Man's soft laugh, a sound like icy water down my back. My chest got tight. The Thin Man wanted me, but I had Kelsey's hair. He'd go for Jim now, and there was nothing I could do. I wanted to cry and howl and throw myself against the wall. I wanted someone to hold me in warm arms and stroke my head and tell me it was all right, that there was nothing I could've done for Kelsey or for Jim.

Eventually I pulled a brush out of my poke and hauled myself into the flue, right hand up, left hand down. I didn't know what else to do.

Bricks and darkness pressed in all round me. Familiar soot showered from my brush as I scrubbed and suddenly I *hated* my life. It surrounded me like these black bricks, and no matter how high I climbed, there was always something to stop me before I could reach the top and get out. The best I could do was rattle the chimney pot. Eventually I'd cough up black sludge and die in Scar's soot cellar. I knew.

What if I left? Why didn't I just throw down my brush and nip out the back door? Scar wouldn't notice I was gone for at least an hour and I'd never have to climb again.

But what then, little Dodd? whispered a dry voice. I looked up and saw the Thin Man hanging above me, grinning his impossibly wide grin, but I wasn't afraid. Maybe it was because I knew I was protected or maybe I just didn't care.

Would you beg for a living, little Dodd? the Thin Man said. *Or perhaps you could steal. Burglars love climbing boys — they're so good at getting into houses. Or you could try the work houses, but they're all full. Poor little Dodd. You're so good at showing other people their fears. What are you afraid of? Are you afraid your parents didn't love you because you're a freak and that's why they left you at the orphanage?*

"No," I whispered.

Come with me! He reached down and stopped, just like before. *You still have Kelsey's hair. A nice boy, he was. I wouldn't have been able to touch him if thoughtful Scar hadn't cut off his hair for me or if you hadn't kept it for yourself. Why did you let him die, little Dodd? Why did you kill him?*

"You killed him," I said hoarsely. "You an' Scar. Not me."

Artwork by George Barr

Scar and his peers are the reason I exist. Why were you *so cruel?*

"Go away," I cried.

Of course, little Dodd. There's Jim to attend to. And he was gone.

I tried not to see what came next, but I knew. There was a loose bit of mortar in Jim's flue. The Thin Man slipped into the cracks and worked at it, making it looser and looser. Jim scrubbed and coughed, scrubbed and coughed, climbing as he went. His back pushed against the weakened spot and it gave unexpectedly. Jim jolted downward and grunted with surprise as his knees mashed against his nose. He struggled for a moment. Then he panicked. I heard every raw scream for help, felt the darkness crowding him. The soot showered down and reached his chin, his mouth, his nose.

Breathe it in, Jim, the Thin Man whispered, and the screams died to a tiny sound in Jim's throat. I could feel his terror, and I whimpered too.

I twisted an arm and managed to get my six-fingered hand into my pocket as black soot rose higher round Jim's nose and mouth. It was my fault. If I hadn't said those awful things, Jim would've taken some of Kelsey's hair and the Thin Man wouldn't be able to touch him.

The Thin Man laughed as Jim struggled again and tried to cough, but he was getting weaker. He was dying. I hung there in the black flue, alone and scared, wondering what to do.

And then I knew what to do. I had always known. Tears tracked down my face and I tried to push the knowledge away, but it wouldn't go.

I could choose between us. Between me and Jim. Not a real choice. I couldn't let Jim die, not when it was my fault that he was unprotected. I had to give myself up to the Thin Man. I had no choice.

"Remember," the old woman said. *"Ye allus got a choice."*

"But I don't," I whispered.

Then I realized I did. I had one. Just one.

Jim stopped breathing. As fast as I could, I yanked Kelsey's hair out of my pocket and let it go. It drifted down the flue, but I didn't spend any time watching it. I started to climb — knees and back, knees and back.

The Thin Man looked up. He stared right through Jim's flue, right through the walls and floor of the inn. Right at me.

Well, Dodd, he whispered. *I'm glad you changed your mind.* And he left Jim's flue.

The moment he did, another, larger piece of mortar crumbled away from Jim's knees and shins. He gave a gasping yelp and fell straight down to the fireplace, bruised and shaken, but coughing. I felt better. As long as you could hear the coughing, you knew everything was fine. But I kept climbing — knees and back, knees and back. Above me gleamed a tiny speck of light, the hole in the chimney pot.

Dodd. The Thin Man looked down on me. *Are you ready?*

"I'm not going with you," I said, though the words caught in my throat. It took every ounce of willpower I had, but I kept climbing toward him.

The Thin Man grinned. *You don't have a choice, little Dodd.*

A finger of doubt crept down my spine. Then I shoved it aside with clenched teeth and kept climbing, knees and back, knees and back against the hard black brick.

The Thin Man pulverized a chunk of soot and sent it showering over me, but I knew it was coming and held my breath until I could climb past it.

Stop fighting, Dodd, the Thin Man said. *I always win.*

Knees and back. Knees and back. Slow and steady was the key. Panic, and you're dead. The speck of light grew closer.

The Thin Man found a loose brick and dropped it toward my head. I trapped it against the flue with my cleaning brush and let it fall past me. It crashed on the grating far below. I kept climbing, knees and back, knees and back. The speck of light was almost close enough to touch. A desperate look crossed the Thin Man's face.

Stop! he snarled. *Stop, or I'll —*

"Ye'll what? Kill me?" I asked, still climbing. "I'm gonna die anyway. I ain't got nothin' to lose, an' that give me power. You try t' make us think we ain't got choices, but we do. You can't touch me now. I know."

The Thin Man howled and reached for my face. Spiders and bats and cockroaches crawled and flapped and skittered in swarms from his sleeves, but they weren't real. He just wanted me to panic. I knew. I climbed through them like smoke —

— and reached the chimney pot. The Thin Man was curled up inside it, and he wasn't smiling anymore.

I'm warning you, Dodd, he whispered. *You're —*

"Shut it!" I shouted. "Just shut it, ye goddam *bastard*! Ye hide in the dark and scare us and murder us. But ye ain't gonna touch me again! Not *never*!" I smashed at the Thin Man with my brush, but he was gone and I hit the chimney pot instead. It shattered with a loud pop and suddenly I found myself in sunlight. I blinked for a moment, then crawled out onto the roof and looked back down the flue.

It was empty. The Thin Man was gone.

I stretched my arms, half expecting to hit unyielding brick. But my arms went wide and met nothing — nothing round me, nothing above me. Just the bright and flowing air. I was free!

I laughed a wonderful laugh and threw my brush down the chimney. I had a lot to do. Maybe I'd beg or become a burglar or even go to school. Or maybe something else'd come along.

I ran lightly to the gutter and leaped to the rooftop next door, still laughing, leaving Scar and the Thin Man further behind with every step. A sweet-smelling breeze pulled me along. The old woman was right. I always had a choice.

Right now I chose to get some living done.

❄

Steven Piziks notes that he is still an English teacher in southern Michigan and is taking lessons on the folk harp. "Some of the most fun I've had in my life," he says. This story was inspired by a pair of poems by William Blake — a tireless activist against the working conditions of "climbing boys". The physical conditions and "accidents" portrayed in the story are historically accurate.

The tale itself came from speculation about what sort of boogey-man a climbing boy might fear.

George Barr has been a professional artist since 1960 and has been one of *FANTASY Magazine*'s favorite artists since our first issue (in fact, he's appeared in all but six of the issues). He has won a Hugo as Best Fan Artist and has been nominated in the Professional Artist category as well. He has been a Worldcon Artist Guest of Honor.

Artwork by George Barr

Little Things

by Sherry D. Ramsey

Artwork by Lori Deitrick

Another explosion rocked the walls of the cottage, loosening some of the centuries-old grime on the walls and sending a fine layer of dust sifting down onto my head.

Breath of the Gods! What's the old man doing this time?

I hastily covered the liquid coming to a slow boil over my little burner and hurried to the door, pressing my ear against the wood to catch any sound beyond. Usually I could hear the old fellow swearing if he was all right, but this time there was silence.

I gritted my teeth in indecision. I had been a sorcerer's apprentice for only eight months now, but I had gone running to his rescue so many times already that I knew his reaction if he was truly unharmed. He'd yell the rickety roof down.

"Love of the Gods, girl, don't be such a fusser!" he'd rant, his whiskered face turning an unhealthy purplish color. "You can't make a new spell without making a little noise!" For Nissio, a little noise could be anything from a dropped glass beaker to a blast that might knock out one or more of the precarious walls.

But after a long moment of strained listening there was still no sound from his workshop on the other side of the door. He could be really hurt this time, and need my help. Fetching a deep breath and steeling myself, I opened the door and looked in.

What Nissio called his 'workshop' was simply a big room he had added on to the back of the cottage, and if the rest of the house was shaky, this room truly trembled. Carpentry, even sorcerous carpentry, was not the mage's long suit, and I always felt that the ceiling of this room merely hovered, waiting for a good time to collapse. An inner voice constantly whispered that the collapse would certainly come someday when I was inside.

Smoke was still wisping up from a blackened spot on the worktable as I surveyed the scene, and there was Nissio, whole and unharmed, crouched over his desk with his beard twitching as he muttered happily and scribbled on a bit of parchment.

To say that the room was cluttered would be to grossly understate the proportions of the mess inside. It always looked as if an explosion had just occurred, no matter how recent the last one. Glass beakers and vials of every size, small lengths of wood and metal, and several glowing braziers covered the worktable. The desk was given over to scraps of cloth, drifts of scattered parchment, a box of tiny bones, and several candles in various states of use. On the floor sat a crate where small gemstones were jumbled with hunks of rude stone, and the bookshelves were crammed with leather-bound books, mortars and pestles of every size, and rows of jars filled with many-colored

powders.

Before I could back furtively out of the room he sensed my presence and turned, and instinctively my eyes squeezed shut as if I could ward off the tirade I knew was about to begin. When his voice came, however, I opened them again, wide in amazement. He wasn't angry. He was, in fact, positively jocular.

"Albettra, my girl! Come in, come in! I've just made the most amazing breakthrough!"

Fearing some trickery lurked in the old man's mind I entered the room timidly, but the elderly mage launched into a long-winded account of the unparalleled success of his last experiment. Much of it was beyond my meager magical understanding, but some of it I could grasp, and it was interesting. Interesting to a point, and then my imagination took over, wandering down the path of the future to the time when I was the accomplished sorcerer, crafting spells in my own (sturdy) workshop and recounting my achievements to adoring apprentices.

I came back to the present just as Nissio was chuckling with satisfaction.

"It's one in the eye for that quack, Zipnax, anyway! He'll burst something when he hears about this!"

Zipnax was Nissio's biggest rival, and what may have begun as good-natured competition decades ago was a full-blown sorcerer's feud now. I was starting to smile in what I hoped was a supportive way when the old fellow wrinkled his nose like a rabbit and sniffed the air.

"What in the name of —"

My burner!

I dashed from the workshop and back to my room to find thick black sludge oozing from the beaker, covering the burner and throwing out the most vile odor imaginable. Nissio's scolding went on for some time, but it was tempered by his own earlier success, and he had calmed down and gone back to his workshop even before I had the mess cleaned up.

As the door shut behind him I sighed heavily, but not so heavily that Nissio would hear me. The future I had imagined a few minutes before suddenly seemed to beckon from a point far, far distant, separated from me by a long, broad puddle of sticky black mess.

Nissio was in truly good humor for several days after the explosion, even condescending to teach me another small talent. It would be months yet before I would begin to learn the intricacies of an actual spell, but I had already mastered a goodly number of these so-called 'practice' spells. Although they were extremely simple and often later forgotten when an apprentice progressed to 'real' magic, for me they were thrilling glimpses into the world of spellcraft I would someday inhabit, and every one I added to my repertoire filled me with a deep sense of accomplishment.

I practiced them diligently and used them whenever I could. I never tied or untied a knot with my fingers when I could use the talent instead, I never used flint to light a fire, I never used a rag to dust off my worktable or needle and thread to mend a tear. Sometimes Nissio got a little annoyed with me, casting talents here, there and everywhere, but I think he understood and never really discouraged me from using them. One of his favorite platitudes when I fretted at progressing so slowly in my studies was, "Learn the little things well, and the big things will seem a lot smaller."

Blah, blah, blah, I usually thought, but kept my mouth wisely shut.

At any rate, the feeling of goodwill in our little household continued for almost a week. Then one day Nissio returned from a trek into the village market with a face like a thundercloud. I had another vial on the burner when he came in, but this time I prudently removed it from the flame until I could give it my full attention. I could tell a storm was about to unleash its fury.

Frantically I racked my poor brains, wondering what I might have done to inspire such a rage, but I could think of nothing, unless he had found my cramped writing on the grocery list illegible, and I hardly thought that could be worthy of this much anger. He threw the sack of fresh vegetables onto the table with a soggy *chunk!*, and I knew the riper ones had smashed. We would be having stew for supper tonight.

I said nothing, knowing the hail of wrathful words would soon begin. When it started, my first reaction was vast relief. This time, at least, I was not the source of the tantrum.

"That ill-begotten son of a cantankerous sow has gone too far this time!" he bellowed, stalking the room with beard aquiver. "The man is a mountebank! A copper coin would be too much to pay for one of his spells! A lying charlatan, that's what he is, and he dares to spread rumors about me!"

"Zipnax?" I hazarded the name in a small voice.

"Of course, Zipnax! Bah! The name makes my tongue shrivel to say it!" Nissio was flailing his arms wildly now, his robe fluttering madly and his beard flying in every direction.

I was cautiously working my way around to the other side of my worktable. I had never seen the old fellow so angry and I knew I'd feel a lot safer with something solid between us. When his erratic pacing took him near a wall he'd take an angry swing at it with a wizened fist. There couldn't be much physical strength left in the man, but it didn't take much to set the walls of the rattletrap cottage swaying. Dust was floating lazily down from the ceiling again and I stifled a sneeze.

"To accuse me of stealing!" the old mage was ranting now. "Imagine me, stealing one of his pitiful ideas!"

Bam! His fist hit a wall.

"Not worth a pinch of bat guano, any idea he'd come up with, the supercilious old twit!"

Bam!

"I've been working on that spell for months!"

BAM!

I was really starting to doubt that the cottage could stand much more of this. The east wall now leaned crazily outward at least twice as far as it previously had.

I took a deep breath. "What spell?"

The question halted him in his tracks and he turned to look at me in stunned disbelief. His normally watery gray eyes were fairly starting from his head and his anger had darkened them to the cold, wintry color of granite. The glare turned withering as those eyes drilled into my head.

"The time lapse spell, girl," he shouted suddenly, the veins in his wrinkled neck standing out like taut cords. "The spell I just told you about! To make plants grow faster! Days pass and the plants think it's weeks. Every farmer for miles around will want it! Breath of the Gods, you don't remember the spell that's going to pay for you to eat for the next five years?"

His eyes were like gimlets as he waited for my reply.

"Oh, yes ... er ... that spell! Well, of

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course I remember that spell, it's one of the best ideas you've ever had, and of course you've been working on nothing else for weeks, I can't believe that Zipnax could accuse you of stealing it ..." I was babbling, I knew, but at least he was listening to me and had stopped abusing the walls. Finally he stomped out to his workshop and slammed the door, but the thin wood didn't do much to muffle the clanks and crashes as he continued to vent his anger on various unfortunate objects.

Relieved at least to have him out of the room, I made a thick stew for supper and used a talent to make it extra spicy so that he'd be more likely to eat it in silence. It worked only to a certain degree. He continued to mutter maledictions against the villainous Zipnax between bites of stew and long gulps of icy water.

The next morning the old mage was up and gone long before I was awake, and when I did rise I scurried around the cottage, frantic to finish all my daily chores before his return. I wanted to do nothing that might trigger a relapse of yesterday's ire.

I was diligently poring over an ancient text on the magical properties of rare herbs when he returned, and when I risked a glance at him I was amazed to see his grizzled face wreathed in smiles. Reflexively, I smiled a welcome, and he crossed the room to inspect what I was doing, murmuring approval and actually patting my shoulder. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. These abrupt mood changes were beginning to try my sanity.

"Well," he said with a grin, rubbing his hands together in self-satisfied glee, "I've fixed old Zipnax's wagon, and good. He needn't think he can muddy my good name and get away with it."

Oh, Gods. "What did you do?"

I was afraid to hear the answer. The old fox had a vengeful side that could probably be trusted to carry things much too far.

"Nothing much."

He puttered around the room for a minute, humming softly under his breath. My eyes followed him like a mouse eyeing a cat. This couldn't be good. He was just too happy.

Finally his circuit of the room brought him back to my desk and he grinned at me again, then produced his news like a country fair conjurer producing a live chicken from a silk scarf.

"I undid a few of his spells."

I gasped, then clamped my mouth shut. Undid his spells. Undid his spells?! There was no worse insult to pay a sorcerer. Countermagic was, in fact, sternly frowned upon by the governing council of wizards. I knew the color had drained from my face, but I didn't want to appear too shocked. The old loon was too pleased with himself and far be it from me to put a damper on that. I forced a weak grin in return.

"Oh, really? What did you do?" I even managed a thin chuckle.

"Let's just say that Farmer Bossit's wife has that unsightly mole back, Mistress Urgudd's hens have stopped laying again, and the mayor suddenly gained back a lot of weight."

Breath of the Gods!

Somehow I kept a smile on my face, but it was a stiff one, and my teeth were clamped painfully. This was worse than I thought! When one sorcerer undid

another's spells, there was no obvious explanation for what had happened. It simply appeared that the spell had suddenly failed. The townsfolk Nissio had just mentioned would be enraged, thinking that Zipnax had sold them inferior spells, and would, at the very least, demand their money back. Farmer Bossit was a huge beast of a man who adored his (to be frank) homely wife. It was quite possible he would not be satisfied with just the return of his coin. The mayor had a wide circle of friends and Mistress Urgudd was the local gossip. Word of the spells' failure would spread like fire in a wheatfield.

Nissio had paid Zipnax back well indeed.

Still humming, Nissio went out to his workshop and began tinkering. I sat and worried mightily for an hour or so, then convinced myself to stop when I ran out of fingernails to chew. It wasn't really my problem, I reasoned, and if the worst happened I could probably find myself another teacher.

It nagged at me, though. Eccentric and erratic as Nissio was, I had developed a sneaking affection for the old coot.

The day passed uneventfully but for the fact that Nissio's good humor prompted him to prepare supper instead of leaving it to me. I had never eaten a meal produced solely by sorcery before and although the flavors were delectable, I found myself hungry again a scant few hours later. Which I suppose demonstrates that sometimes it isn't worth it to take shortcuts, at least not with food.

The following morning dawned warm and sunny, and I was at my work early, hoping to get through most of it before the heat of the day. After studying for several hours and finishing two of the endless experiments Nissio set for me, I was starting to wonder if maybe the mage's unorthodox vengeance was going to pass without comment.

Without warning the peace of the little cottage was shattered. A shimmer in the center of the room caught my eye and a chill breeze rifled the notes on my table for an instant, then a sudden, loud *pop!* lanced my ears.

Zipnax stood in the center of the room.

I gaped rudely at the intruder. Nissio's rival was a tall man, taller than I was, and I stretched high for a woman. His brown robe hung loosely on a thin frame. He looked perhaps not quite as old as Nissio, although with sorcerers, who could tell?

Peppery gray hair fell to his shoulders and his beard was only half as long as Nissio's and trimmed to a neat point. At least, I imagined it was usually a neat point, because right now everything about the mage was in wild disarray.

I felt a chill flicker inside my head as Zipnax assessed my own powers and dismissed them. Green eyes darkened by rage bored through me as the sorcerer barked, "WHERE IS HE?!"

I was still sitting with my mouth hanging open, stunned by the mage's unorthodox arrival. To materialize inside someone's home was considered the ultimate in bad manners for a sorcerer. The fact that everyone knew they could do it was tempered by the fact that they never did, so people felt secure. After all, how safe could a mundane person feel if they knew a mage might just pop in at any second without warning? Many, many things would be impossible to do in any comfort. So it simply wasn't done.

But Zipnax had done it, and to another sorcerer, at that. This is going to be bad. I was opening my mouth to answer, although I had no idea what I might say, when I was granted a reprieve of sorts.

Nissio himself burst in from his workshop, fairly spitting sparks. The two men faced each other in silence for a moment, simply letting their rage build to a full rolling boil. The room fairly hummed with it. I was rooted to the spot, and my heart was throbbing like a goblin war drum.

Magebattle.

The word, with all its terrifying connotations, was echoing inside my head. The most destructive forces in the world could be unleashed when two sorcerers fought each other — whole towns had been destroyed in the process. Beggar's Swamp, two days to the east, had once been Beggar's Mountain, before a magebattle had been fought there. Cold sweat pricked my brow as the two enraged sorcerers stared at each other.

"This time you've gone too far." Zipnax's voice was deathly quiet, belying the fires of rage that burned in his eyes.

"You started it." Nissio's tone would freeze water.

"You stole my spell!"

"I certainly did not!"

"You did!"

"You started a false rumor about me!"

"I thought it was true! And you undid my spells!"

"I did not!"

"You did!"

"Did not!"

"DID!"

I stared at the two maddened mages in disbelief. Whatever I had expected, it wasn't this. They're like two spoiled little boys! My horror was beginning to slip away, and my own anger was rising. The fierce fury that was quite possibly about to lead to disaster boiled down to a childish spat, and here I was, caught in the middle of it.

The shouting continued for several minutes, and suddenly I realized that I was truly no longer afraid. Anger had taken its place. A fine example these two were setting, with an impressionable young apprentice in the room! My two younger brothers hadn't gotten away with this kind of behavior when we were little kids.

And these two weren't going to now. They obviously needed to be taught a lesson about the responsibility that goes with magical power. And I was just the person to do it.

Predictably, Zipnax and Nissio eventually got too mad to speak any more and each began gathering power to unleash a spell at the other. Even with my novice's scant awareness of the magical atmosphere I could feel it ripple as they drew from it. A distraction was needed, and all I had in my arsenal were a few minor talents.

Normally, of course, a talent would be useless against a sorcerer. It would be sensed and defused with no effort. These two, however, were completely engrossed in their feud. Neither would notice the tiny amount of magical energy I would siphon off — I hoped. But it seemed safe enough. They both seemed to have forgotten my existence.

Calling up the words of the talent, I reached out with my mind and snatched enough power to use it twice. Zipnax and Nissio were beginning to glow faintly and the cottage was trembling at the intense buildup of energy when I cast the talent, first at Zipnax and then at Nissio.

Aahhh-chooooo!

AAHHH-CHOOOOO!!

Enormous sneezes burst forth from each of them, shattering their concentration and dispelling the magical energy for the moment. I held my breath for a moment, but neither of them even looked at me as they recovered their poise. There was enough dust drifting down from the quaking roof to make anyone sneeze. Still glaring at each other like a couple of ancient roosters, they recovered and began to gather power again.

Mentally I allowed myself a grim smile. If it worked once, it would work again. But I had to be careful. I didn't want either of them to suspect my intervention. What else could I do?

Again I reached into the magical atmosphere for a drop of power, and then I sent a thought out the window of the cottage and into the small flower garden Nissio cultivated as a minor eccentricity. A honeybee was bumbling from blossom to blossom, and I called to it mentally with the promise of sweet nectar.

Trustingly it buzzed through the window and I nudged it toward the mages, again glowing with accumulated energy and about to unleash it at each other. The insect was a big one, and buzzed agitatedly back and forth between the sorcerers, stupidly hunting for the promised nectar and almost bumping their faces.

It was a distraction, but not a big enough one this time. Both mages managed to hurl their spells before swatting at the hapless insect. Jagged bolts of silvery lightning darted from Zipnax's fingertips. A seething yellow sphere of flame billowed out from Nissio. I gulped and squeezed my eyes shut for an instant, then thought better of it — I had to see what happened.

Cast at the same instant, the magical energies roiled toward each other and collided in a brilliant eruption of multicolored light. Shards of color scattered around the room as if a hundred rainbows had suddenly been shattered. I ducked behind the table as the magical forces dispersed and a tremendous wave of energy forced Zipnax and Nissio to stagger back from each other. They both cast me a suspicious glance then, but I was wringing my hands and wearing my best look of maidenly dismay, and they turned their attention back to each other.

Unfortunately, the collision of their spells and the canceling of the spells' powers seemed only to have infuriated the sorcerers further. Puffing up like bullfrogs, they began building up their power again, never taking their eyes from each other. The hatred passing between them was an almost palpable thing, but with sudden insight I knew that in this, too, they were like little boys. Pummeling each other in the mud one minute and friends again when their anger was spent. I had to put a stop to this.

Quickly, frantically, I ran through the pitifully few talents I had mastered, discarding each in turn as not useful or not strong enough. It had to be something significant, something to make the two stop and take notice. I thought furiously. Where was their weakness?

And then suddenly I knew that the answer boiled down to what this battle was all about in the first place — pride. If I could hit them there, I might end it before disaster struck. There was no sense in talking to them; they weren't listening. But I thought I could see another way to do it. Using another of my tiny, tedious, trivial talents.

Extending my mind into the atmosphere once more I cautiously drained a bigger chunk of energy than I'd taken before. Immersed in their struggle, the sorcerers again failed to notice. If this worked, they'd notice, I thought. I treated myself to another grim inner smile. Oh, yes, they'll notice this, all right. If we all live long enough. I set to work.

Over the next few minutes the sorcerers traded spells like merchants trade expensive goods; warily, but with all the skills they possess. Zipnax managed to launch another bolt of energy a split second before Nissio cast. It flashed across the room, whistling like some ethereal spear. Nissio instinctively poured his accumulated energy into a translucent shield which spat sparking orange flame when the missile crashed into it, but held long enough to disperse the spell. I cringed, but kept my concentration on the task at hand.

In the next assault, Nissio was the quicker, crimson fire arcing from his fingertips across the room before Zipnax could unleash his spell. He, too, managed to shield himself from the onslaught without a heartbeat to spare. For a few minutes after that they returned to shouting imprecations at each other as they built up energy for another strike.

I was only half listening. My task was turning out to be more difficult than I had thought. There were so many things to concentrate on all at once! Every time they traded spells I had to fight to keep my mind on what I was doing. And the cottage was on the verge of collapse, walls swaying, ceiling creaking alarmingly.

But it was nearing completion. Feverishly, silently, I worked my talent, performing a chore that was so mundane, so insignificant, that its importance only became evident when next the sorcerers readied themselves to throw death at each other.

From my vantage point, the timing couldn't have been better as I finished. Both mages had drawn incredible amounts of power from the atmosphere, preparing to hurl spells of the highest magnitude. The air around them tingled. I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck raised like hackles. All their energy and all their volcanic anger were about to unleash in an absolute conflagration of destructive force.

And in the predictable manner of sorcerers, showmen to the last, they both flung their outstretched arms over their heads dramatically, just as I completed the little job I had begun.

I released my concentration in the instant their arms raised. All the tiny threads in the shoulder seams of their robes, that I had been slowly, slowly unraveling, gave way at once. In a quick flutter of fabric, the two robes dropped to the floor.

Leaving both men naked.

That was even better than I had hoped. The summer heat had persuaded them to spurn underclothes as an unnecessary evil, and the dramatically threatening poses were suddenly absurd. They were simply two elderly, naked men standing in front of a young woman. I had a spectacular view of their faces as each thought to laugh at the other's predicament a split second before realizing his own exposed state.

I felt a torrent of unused magical energy ebb swiftly away as the two mighty mages scrambled red-faced to cover themselves with the useless robes. Mortified beyond thought, Zipnax ran for the front door as Nissio sprinted for his workshop. The sight of those skinny chicken-legs scrambling for the doors will stay with me all my days. Suddenly I couldn't contain my-

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self any longer. I positively hooted with laughter until tears of exhaustion and relief washed down my cheeks.

Nissio wouldn't speak to me and avoided me completely for almost a week, until one day I heard sudden, uncontrollable laughter from his workshop. His sense of humor had won out over his injured pride and he came out later, blushing again, to apologize to me. Zipnax I never saw again, but he and Nissio were on uncommonly good terms after that.

* * *

So for other apprentices tired of toying with meaningless talents and longing for the world of real spellcasting, my advice is pretty much the same as what Nissio told me. Don't lose sight of the little things. Sometimes they're even more important than the big ones.

❄

Sherry D. Ramsey is a former lawyer who decided that the problems of her characters were more interesting (and easier to deal with) than those of her clients. She lives in Nova Scotia, Canada, with her husband and one-year-old daughter. This is her first professional sale.

Lori Deitrick has been published in *Aboriginal Science Fiction Magazine* and *Amazing Stories* as well as several appearances in M*arion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*. Her first assignment with us came after a recommendation from Real Musgrave. Her fantasy originals have won numerous awards and grace the walls in the homes of many collectors. She is also known for her sensitive portraiture and wildlife work. She shares a sudio in Knoxville, Tennessee, with artist husband David Deitrick, and three children.

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THE THREE TASKS

by Huan-Hua Chye

The wizard came and knelt before her. "I have come to win you, my lady," he said. "When will you be my bride?"

Win me? More like he wants to win the name of king. "When pigs fly," the princess snapped bad-temperedly, then realized her mistake when the wizard rose, smiling pleasantly, and left the castle.

The next morning, every single pig in the royal sty had flapped up to the roof of the Eastern Tower. The princess ran out to the drawbridge to look, and was dismayed to see a few adventurous piglets swooping around the crenellations and frightening the swallows. "Well, my lady? When will you be my bride?" the wizard said from behind her.

The princess took a deep breath, considering. By tradition she had two more impossible tasks to set him. "When you have turned the Three Sisters to gold, iron, and silver."

"Highness!" cried the Master of Ceremonies the next morning, shaking her awake. He beckoned her to a south-facing window. The princess swallowed as she looked upon the three great mountains that towered above the plain. The first shone a brilliant yellow, the second a dull dark gray, and the third the bright color of fish scales. The princess had no doubt that they would be genuine.

She shivered. Only one more chance to win her freedom.

"When will you be my bride?" asked the wizard again, in court. The Master of Ceremonies stood behind the princess.

"Something truly impossible, Highness," he whispered. "Something the powerful wizard cannot do."

"Truly impossible?" the princess murmured, thinking.

"My lady, when will you be my bride?" the wizard prompted.

The princess turned on him, her eyes flashing, because she had thought of something she felt was truly impossible. "When you love me with all your heart, and wish to wed me for that reason only."

The wizard stared at her for a minute. Then he burst into laughter. "My respect, Princess, for you have found the one thing I cannot do with my magic." And he bowed to her, left the court, and was never heard from again. ❄

Huan-Hua Chye is a high-school student in Sunnyvale, California. In addition to two previous sales to this magazine, she has been published in *Cricket*, *Broken Cisterns*, and *In Other Words*.

George Barr has been a professional artist since 1960 and has been one of *FANTASY Magazine*'s favorite artists since our first issue.

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

THE BONE'S CAPTIVE BRIDE

by Jo Clayton

"Green grow the rushes in Keäroh's Mere," Tingamay sang. She had her skirts kilted round her waist and the sleeves of her blouse rolled up past her elbows and was standing knee deep in the water at the edge of the mere, bent over as she cut rushes for her grandmother's pallet, using a crescent-shaped knife honed so sharp it could cut a thought in half. Her long blonde braids fell forward over her shoulders, the tips brushing the water as she worked.

She sliced the bundle she was holding loose from its roots with the hooked knife, slipped it into her carry sack and groped for some more.

Behind her in the wild olive grove, starlings darted in and out of the branches, talking in screams as starlings do, twinkling the stars on their shoulders at each other. *There are men in the willow copse,* they shrieked together and apart. *There are men in the copse watching Tingamay cut reeds.*

In the willow copse Nail shifted off the ant hill he hadn't noticed, being absorbed by the twitch of the girl's behind as she worked. He listened to the starlings and scratched at an ant bite on his wrist. "Cheekin' birds."

"What?"

"Nothin', Ag. You sure this time that's the one?"

"Knuckle Bone said."

"Knuckle Bone said last time too and we near got usselves shortened a head."

"You want to go back and tell Ka'atiga we messed up again and he's got no bride?"

Nail grunted and went back to watching the girl, leaving the planning to his older brother Agate. He didn't like the interest the birds were taking in that girl. Even if she didn't seem to understand what they were saying, it meant there was something spooky about her. He scratched some more and cursed Uncle Yellowsnow for feeding him owlroot and teaching him the language of birds. Lot of things he'd be better off not knowing. Like the time he near got Gingersnap in the hay and the barn owl told him her brothers were waiting outside to set the hook and reel him in. Would it be so bad to be a married man today and let off this miserable bride search? At least he'd be sleeping warm and Ginger was a pleasant armful though she'd got a bit plump the past couple of years.

Tingamay straightened, pushed at the tendrils of hair sticking to her sweaty skin. Her face was flushed from bending and her back was complaining, but her gather sack was plump with reeds. She didn't mind this labor; it was a pleasant task and it got her away from the house and the pressure her grandmother was putting on her to say vows with Tonokot. Grandmother doted on his sheep and his horses. "It's because she loves me." Tingamay sighed. "She wants me taken care of. Ai, those starlings are loud today. I wonder what's bothering them?"

She wasn't nervous because this was a Ghost mere and no man or woman of K'homsee would dare come here without being weighted so heavily with amulets they'd clank when they walked. She threw her head back and laughed as she thought of that, stretched her arms up toward the sun, drawing golden threads from the light and dropping them, letting them melt back into the common air.

She turned and began wading up the mere's bank, her eyes on where she was stepping because it was silt mud, fine and slippery, the footing treacherous; she didn't want to have to trudge home looking like a mudbug put out to dry.

The starlings grew louder; the air was filled with the sound of their wingbeats — and in the middle of all that Tingamay heard the slap of feet on grass. She looked up, saw two strangers running at her. She snatched at the sun, meaning to throw yellowfire at them, but before her fingers could close, something shimmery like a dragonfly's wings came whirling at her.

The net settled over her, heavy, heavy, so heavy despite its fragile look. It pressed her arms down, locked them to her sides, it rested on her mouth so

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

she couldn't speak.

"Why couldn't you wait till she got out of the stinking water, Ag? That mud's blue! Kwil't knows what's in it. You think I'm gonna put my feet in that? No way I'm gonna put my feet in that. You fetch her."

"Nail, you know galupelu well it'll take both of us to lift her with the net and all. Knuckle Bone says you do what I tell you or you'll be sorry. Now you get in there and shove her at me and grab her legs when she goes over, I'll get her shoulders."

"Yeah, well, don't you go letting your hands slip like the first time. If this'n drowns on us, I give up."

"If you'd watch how you pushed, it wouldna happened."

Frightened and helpless for the moment, Tingamay listened to them bicker and spared a thought to wonder what was teaching her to understand them. Was it the net? Was that part of its magic? If so it was a fine magic and interesting. Besides, the longer she listened, the more her fear left her. If she couldn't get away from this pair, she'd deserve what happened to her.

The big handsome one with the blurry look of a candle gone soft in summer heat waded into the water, slipping and slithering and swearing with every foot shift. A moment later she felt a thump between her shoulders. She began to fall forward, gulped in a lungful of air just as the skinny one missed his grip and let her plunge face down into the water.

Over her as her lungs started burning, she heard the brothers arguing, then a third voice like a mosquito whine.

"Oh." Ag reached into the water, caught a handful of net and blouse and lifted. The woman's face was almost purple and her eyes made Kowt's forge fire look cold. He relaxed as she blew out the breath she'd been holding and gulped in more air. She was definitely not drowned. He shifted his grip, got his other hand involved because she was by Kwil't heavy, yelled at Nail. Together they lugged the woman from the water.

The starlings perched in the top branches of the olive trees, fluttering their wings, flexing their stars. *The wild men have got her,* they screamed, *they've got our Tingamay. Who shall we tell,* they screamed, *who can bring her back?*

Nail watched as the flock rose, climbing in a spiral, their blue and gray bodies like smoke, watched as they flew away in a great dark arrow pointing south.

"Ag, we gotta get the net off her and we gotta get out of here now!"

"What's the hurry? Nobody round for miles. 'Less you saw something in your scout you didn't bother telling me."

"Nah, it's them galupelu birds. I knew this'n ..." Nail poked his toe at Tingamay's ribs, "I knew she meant trouble. You see what she did with her fingers? Should probably tie a rock to her and put her back in that pond."

"Knuckle Bone says no." Ag pulled the calf-ties from his belt. "You do the ankles, I'll do the wrists. And don't waste time with fool arguing. You said it, yerself, we han't got it to waste."

That pair might not have sense enough to get out of the rain, but they knew their knots and they threw them with the speed of much practice. Tingamay had watched Tonokot's drovers handle calves; they had the same kind of casual but highly effective skill. Right now she felt very much like one of those blatting babies.

When her wrists and ankles were secured, the two of them peeled the net off her, leaning so close she could smell them, not a pleasant experience. The skinny one, Ag, was a mouth breather and she got an all too intimate acquaintance with his coated tongue and the tarnished silver tooth among the yellow tombstones of his other teeth. Does he ever clean them, she wondered.

Their faces were intent as they rolled her about so they could peel the nearly intangible net off her body. Tingamay tensed as the younger one, Nail, took the opportunity to grope her behind and her breasts. There was that tiny squeaking sound again, and he took his hand away as if it had been slapped.

She relaxed. Interference was apparently one thing she didn't have to worry about.

When the net came off her head, she flexed her fingers, closed her eyes to

slits against the glare of the sun. The chittering sound distracted her a moment, then Ag was over her with something in his hand that she couldn't quite make out. He tapped it against her forehead.

It was worse than the net. Her being shrank from the touch of that thing and her mind slowed until she could hardly find the strength to lay thought against thought. Hands touched her ankles, the sudden cold of a knife, the ropes fell away. Hands touched her wrists and in a moment they were free. Hands worked at her neck, a stiff leather was slid 'round it.

A dog's collar, she thought. What?

It was tight at first and hampered her breathing. She coughed, tried to talk. All she could make was a grunting sound.

Ag stuck one of his filthy fingers between the collar and her neck, loosened it a little. "Nail, I got it right now, set the buckles."

"All right, all right, don't yell, you always yell."

Tingamay felt a tugging at the collar and Ag's fingernail started to cut into her skin. She tried a protest, but once again couldn't shape words and the two men ignored her as they continued their bickering until Nail clicked the snaphook of a leash through a metal loop on one side of the collar and got to his feet.

"All right, Tingamay," he said. And she was appalled that he knew her name. "On your feet."

Her body rose, and when Nail tugged on the leash, it followed him. Down under the muffling effect of the Knuckle Bone and the Collar, anger stirred in her, a small and distant fire.

They passed through the willow copse and came to three horses tied to a fallen tree.

Starlings hopped in the trees they rode past, chattering at each other. *Our Tingamay is leaving us. Two men are stealing our Tingamay. Oh sorrow oh woe, our Tingamay is leaving us.*

Tingamay was muddy and damp and getting colder with every breath she took. She rode clumsily; what with the chill and the numb spell the Knuckle Bone had cast on her, it took forever to make her body obey her mind's commands and it was nearly impossible to respond properly to the movements of her horse. She hated this. It was deliberate cruelty to force any beast to carry someone in her condition — especially riding as fast as they were. Her mount kept trying to lag behind and get its head down so it could rid itself of this weight that was rubbing its back raw. Nail dealt with that each time it happened and continued to ignore her attempts at protest.

When they crossed the bound-line of K'homsee, the sun was touching the tips of the mountains ahead and shining in her eyes, making them water and distracting her even further from the thinking she was trying to do.

Tingamay felt the crossing like a door closing behind her.

She had no father or brothers to come hunting for her and Tonokot wouldn't stir himself or his men for someone not promised to him. And the Ihlthon of K'homsee could not send a warband beyond the boundmarks without bringing more trouble than he'd be willing to risk, even for a Sunwitch.

As best she could, working round the dulling and distancing magic of Knuckle Bone, she studied her captors. She didn't recognize the clan sign on the muscle of the older one's upper arm and she knew all the clans round K'homsee, at least on this side of the mountains. They'd come a long way to capture her. That said something about the urgency that drove them. It was a bothersome thing to think about.

Except for Nail's understanding the talk of birds, they seemed to have no magic of their own or any understanding of the forces they wielded, yet they had a power so much greater than hers that she was helpless before it. It was a contradiction and contradictions cried out for resolution. She worried at the problem, turning it over and over, licking it, chewing at it.

Their power seemed to be invested in things and they used these as tools as she used the reaping knife to cut the reeds.

As she thought of the knife, she groped for it, then remembered dropping it. It was somewhere in the mud on the bottom of the mere. And her gathersack was gone, left behind — all her work wasted. She wept for the reeds that would rot unused and was in truth weeping for a Grandmother left alone. Then she scolded herself for wasting what was more important than reeds and went back to studying Nail and Ag.

Tools. A tool doesn't care whose hand it fit. Getting a fit might be a problem, though. Make the wrong moves and it could turn on you. Studying. I'm good at that. It makes Grandmother furious that I ask why all the time. But why's the best question. When you know why, how expands and gets easier.

By the time they reached the stream the brothers seemed to know about since they kept going even after it grew dark enough to make riding dangerous, she had begun to read the forcelines in the collar about her neck, though she couldn't yet understand the flow of the power. It was a very alien kind of power to her own teaching. Hers was intuitive, and this seemed to depend upon arbitrary imperatives.

Ag jerked on the leash and ordered her from the saddle. She wanted to obey him but her muscles had turned to syrup sometime in that long ride and she couldn't so much as flex a knee.

Nail put a hand on his shoulder and moved him aside. "Ag, she's a girl, probably never been on a horse in her life, soft little thing. Pretty soft little thing with hair like fall grass." He pulled her from the saddle, then stood holding her against him, a silly grin on his face as her legs started folding on her and her body rubbed hard against his on its way to collapse.

Ag swore, jerked Tingamay away from him. "Hang onto the saddle, you." He turned to Nail, slapped him hard, then grabbed his shirtfront, shook him and yelled, "You want to mess with Ka'atiga's Bride before the Rite? Least he'd do is lop your goods and set you to tendin' pigs." He let go and shoved and Nail went stumbling backward, a shocked look on his face.

Propped against a tree, Nail wiped blood from his mouth where one of Ag's fingernails had cut his lip. "Hey, Ag, I was only foolin' with her, wasn't gonna do nothin' I shouldna."

"I know you, brother. It don't end up with just foolin' once you get started."

"Ah, Ag, that's different."

"Hunh! You say. Take hatchet and get some wood for fire. I'll get camp set up."

In the pines and cedars that surrounded the camp, owls perched in ragged circle and hooted softly to each other. *Look at the witchgirl, puzzling and puzzling. How long will they hold her, these noisy rough men?*

* * *

Up hill and down dale, they went, 'round mountain and through canyons. And all that time, never once did they give Tingamay an opening to break free of them. Nail and Ag were stupid as bricks but so formidable in their bodies and the tools those bodies used that they didn't seem to need to think.

Tingamay studied them and puzzled at this.

A dozen times she'd seen an argument fruiting that could perhaps distract the brothers and let her slip away, or Ag's persistent jinx would bring falling rocks that knocked him from the saddle, a branch that cracked just in time to slap him silly, a quail whirring up under his horse's nose and spooking it, always something — and yet never an opening she could exploit.

Knuckle Bone's mosquito whine would cut through the angry words, would jolt Nail into grabbing the leash if Ag's jinx caused him to drop it. In effect, Knuckle Bone protected the brothers and did the thinking for them. She was curious about that bone, but she'd need to get closer to do any serious study of it and it was obvious Ag wasn't going to allow that. The only time it was out of its reliquary was when Ag or the Bone decided she was getting ideas they didn't want her to have and he'd knock her on the head with it and shut down for a while all chance of thinking anything.

On the seventh day after they rode from K'homsee, they stopped before a waterfall at the back end of a narrow steep-walled canyon. Both Ag and Nail dismounted. They led their horses and hers onto a narrow ledge that passed behind the waterfall and into a cave that stank like Ag's always gaping mouth. His horse's reins wrapped 'round one arm, he walked ahead, holding up Knuckle Bone. Its harsh bluewhite glow drove the shadows back, knifed through webs whose strands were thick as Tingamay's wrists and glinted off the eyes of huge spiders who cowered as far from the light as they could get. The bones on the floor of the cave, bones from elk and even bear, bones from cougars and wolves, told her without words how these monsters managed to stay alive in such an unpromising place. For once she was glad of Knuckle Bone's power.

She focused her study on the Knuckle Bone now that it was more accessible, teasing out its powerflows and seeking the keys that controlled them, working with a gossamer touch because if she tapped the wrong keys, that might turn the light off and shut the Bone down and that would be very very dangerous in here.

Then they were out of the mountain and Knuckle Bone once again hung in a silver reliquary on a silver chain about Ag's neck.

They went up hill and down dale and roundabout until on the seventh day, they left the mountains and rode out into rolling grasslands that stretched from horizon to horizon with hardly a thing to block the eye between.

High above them eagles soared through the blue and cloudless sky, turning in long spirals, skreeing to one another, *The bride comes, the witchgirl bride, the brothers have brought her as they swore they would.*

Igalute Village was a haphazard scatter of square houses as if a child had built a pyramid with his toy blocks then given it a good hard kick. All around there were herds grazing on the luxuriant grass, with drovers on small shaggy ponies keeping watch over them, herds that dwarfed Tonokot's, black as cloud shadows, extending to the horizon on three sides. It seemed a peaceful and prosperous land. And the magic that brought that peace was strong, so strong she felt it smothering her — it came up through the legs of her horse and poured into her, the analytical magic that she still did not fully understand but thought she might be able to manipulate.

Ka'atiga's house was one of the smaller ones, but was rich and important despite that; there was the most elaborate water garden around it, stretches of grass and flowerbeds and pools with fountains making music from the falling water.

Nail and Ag swung from the saddle. While Nail tied the three sets of reins to a ring on a post, Ag turned to Tingamay. "If you will dismount, lady, there is a room waiting for you, a hot bath and tea after." It was the first time in the whole long trip that he'd asked rather than ordered her to do something.

Tingamay raised her brows, but she didn't comment. She did as he asked, then followed the brothers into the house.

Overhead eagles screamed to each other, *The Bride of the Bone is in her house. The brothers have done the deed despite all misgivings. Long rule the Bride, may her children be many.*

The women who bathed her and dressed her did not speak to her, perhaps because they believed she would not understand them. Tingamay would have been more comfortable if she'd thought their silence rose out of jealousy, but what she saw in their eyes and felt in the gentleness of their touches was a mix of relief and pity. She tried not to let it worry her. Despite what she'd like to do to them, Ag and Nail hadn't tried to hurt or debase her, they just kept her prisoner. How bad could the rest of this be?

Then she thought of the Knuckle Bone and she shivered. One of the women smoothed a hand along her cheek, clicking her tongue in sympathy, but still not saying anything.

The women dressed her in a long skirt embroidered so thickly it stood stiffly out from her body like a circular tent. The designs were complex arrangements of interlocking diamonds done in tiny counted cross-stitch, with threads of dark crimson, forest green and black and a thin line of pale yellow for accent. They drew over her shoulders a short white silk blouse, then over that a black leather bodice that laced in front so tightly she could hardly breathe. She protested, but they didn't listen to her, just pulled those laces hard until the two edges of the bodice met.

They freed her hair from her braids and brushed it and brushed it, touching the pale golden lengths with soft murmurs of pleasure in between the strokes of the brush. She thought about telling them if they kept on doing that, her hair would get so oily it would look like nothing on earth, then remembered where she was and how she got here and was angry with herself for her vanity.

One of them brought in a box carved with more of those interlocking diamonds. She opened it and took out a thick silver chain, looked at it, clicked her tongue and put it back, contemplated the contents of the box a moment, then brought out a gold chain with an emerald set in the middle. She fitted that on Tingamay's head, settling the oval stone between her brows. She frowned, looking from Tingamay's dark blue eyes to the green of the emerald, then shrugged.

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

When Tingamay had rings on her fingers and rings in her ears, chains on her wrists, chains round her neck, they took her by the arms and led her to a small room where Ag and Nail were waiting for her. Before she could thank them for their care, they were gone.

Ag cleared his throat. "'Fore we go in ..."

"Be polite to the shaman behind that door?"

An unhappy look passed across his face as if he'd suddenly stepped in something and didn't know what to do about it. "Thing is," he said, "he wanted a bride so we went and got one. I expect you guessed that. Thing is ..." He moved his jaw back and forth, looked at his hands, looked at the door, looked at Nail who wasn't about to meet his eyes, looked everywhere but at her. "Thing is he isn't exactly what you might expect. And you might say something ..."

Nail cleared his throat. "You don't wanna make him mad. You REALLY don't wanna make him mad."

Ag nodded. "Be best if you don't say nothing. Except if he asks you something, then you better answer, but don't get fancy. Never can tell what'll set him off." He sidled past her, stopped with his hand on the latch. "What you do, you follow me in, Nail's gonna be following you. And when the door's shut behind us, you just stand there till someone tells you what to do. You got that?"

She nodded. There was too much magic around to take chances. When her hand got too close to a wall, crooked wires of lightning jumped to her fingers and even when that wasn't happening, her whole body tingled with the force that was flowing through her. Force she didn't know how to handle. Yet.

Ag opened the door and went inside. Nail slapped her on the shoulder. She scowled but stepped across the threshold into the room beyond.

That room was mostly bare except for the tapestries hanging on the walls, a bench and two tall candlestands; the only light came from the thick red candles burning on those candlestands, so she couldn't tell much about what the embroidery was supposed to represent. The bench was set between the candlestands and on it there was a tatty old drum, cords gray with age, the taut leather head stained and sclerotic.

There was something resting on the drum. She couldn't make out what it was at first, then she realized it was a wide, flat bone.

A shoulder blade? My husband-to-be is a shoulder blade?

Ag moved cautiously forward, took the silver chain from around his neck, opened the reliquary and laid Knuckle Bone beside Shoulder Blade, then he stepped back, touched brow and lips. "We got her, Ka'atiga. She's young and healthy and ... uh ... kinda witchy too."

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

The drum buzzed, then the sound acquired discipline and turned into something like words; at first she had to concentrate and use her imagination to understand what was being said, but comprehension grew easier as she became accustomed to Shoulder Blade's speaking style.

"... chair," the bone said.

Ag licked his lips. "Huh?"

"A chair for the woman, fool. Then you and that brainless cock you call a brother go pay your duties to your family. Kapé has your gifts, you can get them from her on your way out."

Tingamay settled herself in the chair, rested her hands on her thighs and contemplated the bones. Her work with the collar, though it was infinitely simpler than what lay before her, gave her a matrix to begin her understanding of the great magic that dwelt in the Bone. To cover her explorations and speculation, she gave it a sour look and sniffed. "You don't look like you could do anything for a woman. So what do you need a wife for? If you think I'm going to spend my days keeping you dusted, think again, bone."

The drum rustled into a sloppy salacious laugh worse than anything Nail had tried on her. "You'll find out once the knot is tied."

"I don't give consent to this, you know."

"Don't need your consent. You do what you're told."

"Never have, never will."

"Feisty, aren't you. Full of life."

"Uh huh. Mean to keep it so. You try draining me and you'll get a surprise you truly won't like." *And that might even be fact no lie. You've just given me the keys to how you make the drum talk. What happens now, I tease you into showing off and I keep building my set of commands. And do my best to survive what you think up. Heh! Getting the keys is not going to be a problem. Your strings are easier to pull than Nail's.*

"Big words from a scared little girl."

"Pah!"

"Stand up."

"No."

The Knuckle Bone hopped up and down on the drum, then her body lifted from the chair. And her mind tucked away more data.

"I could make you strip and pleasure yourself and all the while I'd be riding your mind and sharing every exquisite moment of it." The drum produced a dry coughing sound. "But that wouldn't be fitting since we're not yet wed. We must do this right so you can take your proper place here in Igalute. Go over to the door and yank the bell cord you see there. Kapé will take you to your room and you can rest until supper. You'll have that here with me and we'll talk some more."

After a few days Tingamay realized that for all its coarse suggestions and the constant verbal nudge-nudge, the bone was lonely. That was the real reason it had sent Ag and Nail searching for a bride. The women of Igalute had too many kin links for it to chat freely with one of them without worrying that by malice or accident she'd let out the things it said to her. With a foreign bride, there would be none of that.

Eagles circled over Igalute Village, their harsh cries cutting through the music of drum and flute, the clapping of hands and stamping of feet in the wedding dance, the clatter of pots and pans, the crackle of juices from the wedding feast where the carcasses of several steers roasted over heaps on heaps of red hot coals. *The Bone takes his Bride, Tingamay is Wife at last. Let the peace continue, let the calves drop tender and succulent for health and delight of our hatchlings.*

On her wedding night and the nights thereafter, Tingamay found that telling the Bone stories of her childhood, mixing those with the ancient fables her grandmother had told to her when she was just a babe, entertained it sufficiently that it never resorted to those practices it had hinted at in that first interview.

Her other premonition was also cor-

rect. It liked showing off for her, bringing her sweets from the distant coastlands and a city whose name she couldn't pronounce, dates and fresh apricots from lands in the far south. Concocting shiny shimmering confections of colored light to amuse her. Or constructing magic spheres with exquisite miniature gardens in them and tiny creatures that moved and lived there.

It gave her a silver comb because it liked to watch her comb her yellow hair.

It gave her a round glass mirror on the day she danced the K'homsee bride's joydance, the one only her husband ever saw.

It gave her bracelets of braided gold when she took beeswax and pinesweat and polished it till it glowed in the candlelight.

And she learned. Silently, subtly she learned the keys to the magic that sustained life in the Bone and through it, the peace and fecundity of Igalute Village and all around it.

A year and a day she stayed quiet, listening and learning, then she walked into the Drum Room and fought with the Shoulder Blade and subdued it utterly. And subdued the Knuckle Bone with it.

When the Bones were quivering with fear on the drumhead, pitiful and disarmed, she contemplated her husband with an odd feeling that she didn't quite understand.

She turned the feeling around and around, tilted it and shook it as if it were a present she didn't want to open yet.

She liked being married to the Bone.

With it as husband, she could go wherever she wanted, do what she wanted without bothering about all the niceties of modesty and propriety that caged in unmarried girls. And it was nice to have someone to giggle and chat with and in the fullness of time, when she felt herself ready, it would be interesting to see how the Bone arranged to pleasure a wife.

On the other hand, greater acquaintance with Igalute and the people who lived here had not brought any greater fondness for either. She wanted to go home to the misty hills where the sky was an intimate thing and not a grandeur that made one feel smaller than an ant, where the land cradled you rather than tolerating you as a parasite moving over its surface.

So late one night she picked up her husband, packed him away in a fine suede pouch and put the pouch in a saddle bag with the other things she meant to take with her. She contemplated Knuckle Bone and decided, sighing, that she and the Shoulder Blade needed it. She put Knuckle Bone in a belt pouch, took the saddle bag and slipped away from Igalute, riding the pretty gray mare her husband had given her for her daylight delight.

She had nearly reached the edge of the grass when a shout brought her head around.

A black mass in the moonlight poured forth from Igalute, all the men of the clan riding after her.

She took out the silver comb, threw it behind her and shouted the key.

A great hedge of thornbrush grew between her and the men of Igalute, the moonlight turning the thorns into glistening silver needles.

A day and a night and another day passed and the men of Igalute were behind her again, shouting and eager, each racing the others to be the first to lay hands on her.

She took out the round glass mirror, threw it behind her and shouted the key.

A vast shallow lake opened out between her and the men. The riders rode into it, then floundered out again and stood on the far bank cursing her.

She reached the entrance to the Cave of Spiders, spoke the key that undid the wards, slid from her saddle and took Knuckle Bone from the pouch where she'd placed it. It turned and twisted in her fingers and tried to fling itself from her grip so it could tumble and turn down the several slopes and roll all the way back to Igalute.

She fought it till it quivered in her hand like puppy she'd spanked and then she turned and tapped the saddle bag. "Behave yourself, Husband. I'd rather not go home a widow, but I'll leave you inside with all those other bones if you anger me now."

The reins of the gray mare wrapped about her arm, Tingamay walked into the Cave of the Spiders. She lifted Knuckle Bone and shouted the key, then followed the light the Bone threw before her.

Knuckle Bone turned treacherous on her and doused its shine when she was halfway through, but Shoulder Blade hummed with fear at the prospect of joining the bone piles on the floor and forced its lesser part to forego rebellion. The bluewhite light flared again; its cutting edge slashed through the mended webs and drove the spiders into their holes.

On the other side of the mountain, she tied the gray mare to a young pine and walked back along the ledge. She threw one of the braided gold bracelets at the opening and crooned a double key. The bracelet expanded to fill the entrance, a web of incorrupt gold turned harder than stone.

Uphill and down dale, 'round mountain and through canyon she went. On the seventh day she rode past the boundary marks and was once more in K'homsee.

The starlings whirled in a cloud above her, screaming, *Our Tingamay has returned and brought a husband with her. Our Tingamay is back and we have our joy again.*

Her grandmother looked up from her sewing. "So you're back."

"You see me."

"What's that you're holding in your hand? It looks like a bit of bone."

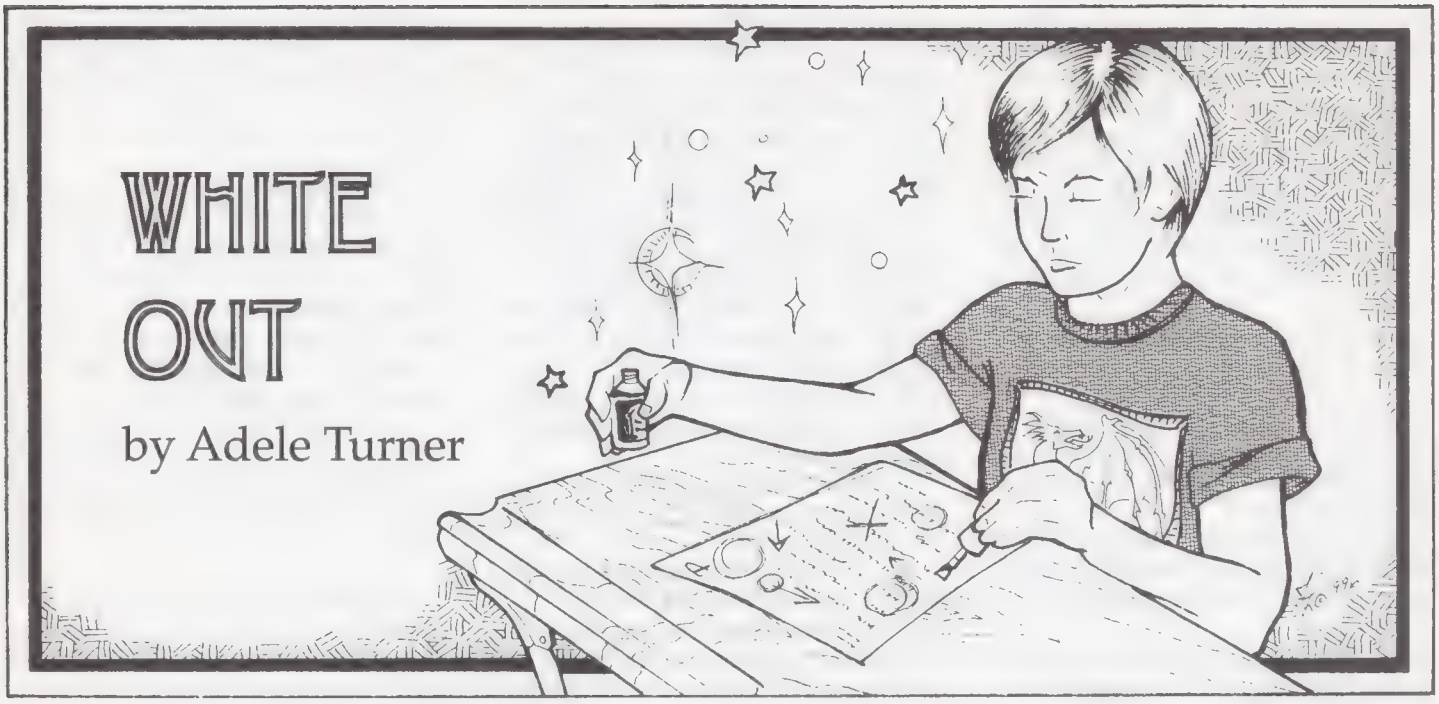
"This? This is my husband." She stroked the Bone. "I've grown quite fond of him. He's a good provider, better than Tonokot would ever think of being. You'll see."

Tingamay lived a long and happy life thereafter. She had half a dozen children and did mostly what she pleased all the days of that life.

❄

Jo Clayton writes, "I was born out of Depression and Dustbowl, reared on a sandhill farm alongside the San Andreas fault. I began as a farmer's daughter, became a teacher in inner city schools in Los Angeles and New Orleans, left that and took up the writing life, something quite as precarious as living perched on a major fault. At present I have sold 32 books and 22 short stories and am working on a fantasy trilogy for Tor." She has recently bee hospitalized; donations to the SFWA Emergency Medical fund are welcome.

Armand Cabrera is a self-taught artist and says, "I've been at it for a million years" — really since 1980 —and worked for several years at Lucas Films on their *STAR WARS* games and at Electronic Arts as a computer artist.



WHITE OUT

by Adele Turner

Artwork by Julia Lacquement

Rudy squeezed the bottle of correction fluid in his fist and grinned maniacally. It would work. Of course it would work! Quickly he read the directions on the bottle. '*Shake well before using.*' Rapidly he shook it up and down, so violently that his whole body quivered in tandem with the motion of the bottle.

He peered around the edge of the door. "*Yes!*" She was still there - Miss Jorgenson, his hated English teacher, bending over the stack of papers on the library table, her back to the door. "*Never sit with your back to the door,*" he chortled to himself, remembering his favorite uncle's poker playing advice.

For a moment, his hatred of her threatened to overwhelm him. "Mr. Rudolph," she had said in front of the whole class, "I don't suppose you would care to enlighten me as to the language in which you've written this theme? It certainly is not English."

He remembered how the light from the ceiling fixtures reflected off her hornrimmed glasses, like the light of an oncoming train, as his classmates - including the beloved Doris - had giggled as he blushed hotly.

After class she had made him stay behind, and he had stood in front of her desk while she continued to berate him. "And your spelling, it's very ... creative, but not recognized by Webster or Funk and Wagnalls, I fear. The only hope I can see for you is if you become a doctor. At least then your handwriting will be nothing out of the ordinary." She sniffed disdainfully. "Now take this paper and correct it."

"Correct it? How?" He looked at the red circles and slashing notes from the top of the page to the bottom.

"That is what correction fluid is for, young man. Unless you wish to recopy the entire paper?"

"No, Miss Jorgenson."

"Then I suggest you get busy. I will be in the library until four-thirty. If you bring your corrected theme to me before then, you might succeed in earning a passing grade."

"Yes, Miss Jorgenson."

He had spent a fruitless hour trying to cover the red marks on the theme paper and make the spelling and grammar corrections Miss Jorgenson had indicated, before finally throwing the bottle of correction fluid down. The thick white liquid splashed across the page. "Rats!" The offending marks had disappeared, along with most of the rest of his theme, leaving a gleaming white page.

Then, "It made my theme disappear, I wonder if it could make Miss Jorgenson disappear?" He remembered his scheduled visit to the dentist for his annual checkup and cleaning. He hated going to the dentist almost as much as English class, and he had lain in bed and wished and wished as hard as he could. "Please make my appointment go away. Please, please, please." When he got up that Saturday morning he was still wishing, and when he walked into the kitchen and was eating breakfast the phone rang and his mother was informed that Rudy's dentist appointment was canceled because Dr. Meade had an emergency. He remembered it so clearly. He had won, it had worked. Since then, he had wished for a lot of things. Some happened, and some didn't, but enough wishes came true that he still believed in the power of wishing.

He ran to the shelf and grabbed another bottle of correction fluid, wishing with all his might that he could make Miss Jorgenson disappear. Now he stood behind the library door, peering through the crack in the doorjamb. Except for Miss Jorgenson, the library was empty. Even the librarian had left the room. Now was his chance.

Wishing as hard as he could, he dashed into the library, twisting off the top of the bottle of correction fluid. Hearing footsteps, Miss Jorgenson turned, and as she did, Rudy tripped, the open bottle flying out of his hand and arcing through the air. Leaping up, she grabbed it before it could hit her and held it at arm's length.

By the time Rudy recovered his balance and skidded to a stop in front of her, Miss Jorgenson was standing and holding the bottle. Without a word she held out her other hand, and Rudy put the bottle cap in it. "For me, I pre-

Artwork by Julia Lacquement

sume?"

Gulping, he nodded.

"Only a prank? Or is there a method to your madness?"

"I wanted to make you disappear," he whispered miserably.

"Very imaginative," she said dryly. "Pity you don't show the same imagination in class. Still, there might be hope for you, after all."

"I don't understand."

"I take it you were simply wishing that the correction fluid would make me disappear, and not trying a more scientific method?" At his nod, she continued, "If you had used the proper spell it would have worked. Your ignorance is my salvation, it seems."

Decisively she put the bottle down on the table and turned back to him. "This confirms my opinion that you're in the wrong class, Mr. Rudolph. Come with me." She turned and walked across the library, threading her way through the stacks to the back of the room, with Rudy following dutifully after her, wondering what punishment Miss Jorgenson had planned for him.

At the rear corner of the room was a small door that Rudy had never noticed before - not that he had spent much time in the library before this dreadful day. Miss Jorgenson opened it, and motioned Rudy inside. After closing the door behind them, she marched him to the front of the small room, where a man stood with his back to them, writing equations on the blackboard.

"Mr. Wilton, I've brought you a new student. Mr. Rudolph was assigned to my class in error, I believe."

The tall, thin man turned and surveyed Rudy. "Thank you, Miss Jorgenson. I trust your judgment implicitly. I'm sure Mr. Rudolph and I will get along splendidly."

"But," Rudy squeaked, "what do you teach? I haven't seen you before."

"Mr. Wilton teaches elementary magic, theory and practice, Mr. Rudolph. Congratulations. You are one of a very few students selected to major in this curriculum." As Miss Jorgenson finished speaking, she slowly disappeared, leaving Rudy standing next to Mr. Wilton open-mouthed.

Rudy turned to Mr. Wilton to ask what had happened to her, when she appeared again in the room with an audible 'pop,' now holding the bottle of fluid in her hand. "I almost forgot," she remarked, and tossed the bottle of correction fluid at the door where they had entered the room. It hit the wall above the door, and the fluid spilled down the wall, obliterating the door. "That's better," she said, and nodded politely at them before disappearing for the last time.

D. Adele Turner is an office manager for a multi-national corporation in Virginia, where she lives with her husband and an assortment of dogs and cats. She has been writing sf, fantasy, and horror short stories for two years, and we missed being her first professional sale by only one month. She is working on a fantasy novel.

Julia Lacquement's work spans a wide range, from hard sf to the softest fantasy, from Asian still life to horror. [Eek!] Her creations are given life daily in her new studio in the Cascade foothills where she lives with her own private god of thunder.

The Test

by Max Wright

Artwork by Jim Balkovek

"Where was Blinor?" From his seat at the head table, Locris scanned the crowd that packed the Great Hall for the Winter Solstice feast. Though the smoke of braziers, torches and cooking fires stung his eyes and filled the high-arched room with a gray haze, it would be hard to miss a man of Blinor's stature. He was widely considered the greatest of Lady Elena's knights, and when the bards sang that no horse was big enough to carry his bulk, they exaggerated but little.

Nervous habit brought his hand to his throat, where the gold collar had been until he'd sold it. He muttered under his breath. Was it not enough that he had failed in his quest? No, he was the poorer for it, too, by a collar and a horse. Steep as it was, his price had apparently been less than that of his rival. Surely, only death would have prevented Blinor from returning at this, the appointed hour. Would it really be so easy? Would the Lady Elena now be his?

With gladness in his heart, Locris turned to look at the fair lady he served and with whom he would now be affianced. Her face was grave as she adjusted the slender silver circlet that held back a cascade of jet black hair and rose, signaling for silence.

A hush fell over the hall, as Elena spoke in a high, clear voice.

"My lords and ladies, it is the appointed hour. Under the agreed terms, Sir Blinor's suit is now forfeit, and I shall be betrothed to the knight Sir Loc..."

From the back of the room came a great commotion.

"Not so, my lady, not so!" boomed a great bass voice from the smoky haze.

"Sir Blinor comes!" The cry started among the rough-hewn tables near the door and spread throughout the great hall.

Locris peered into the grayness. The smoke and the crowd seemed to part, and in strode a giant of a man with a bushy red beard and horned helm. His breastplate was scarred from battle and he bore a great leather sack, which he dropped to the floor with a wettish plop. Locris's nostrils pinched, as the stench of dead flesh mingled with the smell of food and sweat, candles and dogs.

"My lady," said Blinor, bowing low. "The fruits of my quest. Would that they prove worthy of your hand."

Bile rose in Locris's throat, and he could not breathe. So Blinor had been successful, while he had failed.

"Sit here at my table, and refresh yourself for a while," said Elena, gesturing to an empty chair beside her. "Then you and Sir Locris will both tell us of your adventures."

"I will, with thanks," said Blinor, bounding onto the dais and moving around the table to take his seat beside Elena. A page placed food and wine before the knight, who drew a silver-handled dagger from his belt and began to eat.

Locris looked down at his plate. His appetite had died when Blinor entered the room; now the odor of the sack seemed to be the stench of his own failure. The meat Locris had already eaten threatened to rise from his belly. He turned away, not daring to look at

his lady or his rival. How could he face either of them when he had failed?

Nervously, his fingers again sought the collar. Perhaps there was some way, a trick of phrasing perhaps, that would enable him to cast his story in a more favorable light. No. That seemed most unlikely. A lie? Desperately, Locris tried to think of a creature he could claim to have vanquished without taking a trophy. A mist? Completely ethereal, but immune to cold steel. A wight? No, he'd have to produce a weapon or piece of treasure. Besides, there hadn't been any wights in the kingdom since his grandfather was a child. Dejected, Locris cradled his head in his hands. What was the use? How could you possibly lie to a magic sword? No, awful as it was, Locris knew he would have to tell the truth. Even if he had lost his honor, he would preserve his honesty.

The pages were clearing the tables now, and Locris felt his stomach sink as Lady Elena rose and again addressed her guests.

"My lords, my ladies, I am certain that you are all as eager as I to hear what adventures have befallen these two good knights. Whose tale would you hear first?"

Some of the pages and younger knights, heads addled with too much wine, began to rudely pound their hands on the heavy tables and crying "Blinor! Blinor!" as though it was a cockfight, not a feast. Elena smiled indulgently, letting the youths enjoy their fun. Then, just when it seemed to Locris that the shouts would deafen him, she motioned for silence.

"So it shall be. Rise, noble Sir Blinor, and before my father's sword, tell us your tale," Elena said, pointing to the sheathed blade that lay on the table before her.

As his rival stood, picking up his bag, Locris wanted nothing more than to dive beneath the table and hide until it was all over. Still, hoping to save whatever shreds of dignity were to be preserved on this disastrous night, he squared his shoulders and sat erect, pretending to listen intently as Sir Blinor spoke.

"Know, my lady, and all who serve her, that I rode for half a year, far beyond your dominions, in search of a challenge worthy of your hand. At last, when I had all but despaired of fulfilling my quest, I came to a tree that grew beside a cave. The shields of I know not how many knights hung from its branches, and I saw that the entrance to the cave was littered with bones and broken weapons.

"'Here,' I thought to myself, 'is some mighty challenge.' I beat one of the shields with the butt of my spear until I heard snarling and the gnashing of teeth coming from within the cave. I closed my visor, and lowered my spear, and waited until there emerged from the cave ..." Blinor paused dramatically, his eyes sweeping the room before he reached into the bloodsoaked, stinking sack and pulling out a rotting ball of flesh and matted hair. There was a gasp of revulsion from the crowd. Locris's eyes snapped shut, but not before taking in the red eyes, yellow fangs and sloughing, gray skin of a hideous ogre. Elena blanched white, and she placed a hand on the table to steady herself as Blinor put the head back in the bag. The crowd again began to chant his name, and Blinor basked in their adoration until some of the older knights cried for silence that he might continue his story.

"Now I tell you, when this ogre emerged from the cave, I knew, really knew, what fear is. For the brute was as tall as two men and carried in his hands a club the size of a tree. My horse sought to flee at the sight, but I couched my spear and dug in my spurs, charging

Artwork by Jim Balkovek

straight at the monster. Now so strong was this ogre that he seized hold of my lance with his free hand and snapped it in half as though it were a twig. So I drew out my sword, and charged him again. He swung the great club, knocking me to the ground."

Blinor paused again. Locris could hear the creaking of benches as every person in the room leaned forward in anticipation. Even he now wondered how Blinor had overcome so fierce an adversary.

"The monster lumbered towards me, laughing. Well, my lords and ladies, a knight is supposed to be brave, that's true. But he should also be wise, and I thought it wiser to lie still, as if in a swoon or mortally wounded. The ogre, thinking he had only to finish me off, straddled my prostrate body and lifted his great club high over his head, ready to dash out my brains."

The crowd gasped as one, and Lady Elena's hand flew to her mouth to stifle a cry of terror.

"Then, moving with all my speed and strength, I thrust upwards with my sword, then rolled out from between his legs, no easy task for a man in armor I can tell you.

"As I pulled myself back to my feet, the brute turned to face me again. He tried to raise the club, but toppled on the his side, too weak to stand. My blade had wounded his thigh badly, and foul-smelling black blood ran down his leg. He thrashed about mightily, crying out in his anger and his pain. I approached him warily, then cut off his head. And I tell you, so thick was this beast's neck that it took me three blows to do it." His tale completed, Blinor dropped the bag at Elena's feet.

"My lady, my pledge." He bowed low, as the hall filled with the cheers of lords and ladies, pages and peasants.

As the crowd noise subsided, Lady Elena spoke again. "A bold adventure, and well told, Sir Blinor. Now, what will we hear from you, Sir Locris?"

A murmur of approval rose from the tables occupied by Lady Elena's mages, advisors and scribes. Though less boisterous in their support than the soldiers, most of them hoped fervently that Locris would carry the day. In

Artwork by Jim Balkovek

their view, he was only slightly inferior as a warrior and a far abler administrator and strategist.

Locris tried to rise, but his legs had turned to stone. He bit his lower lip until he drew blood, hoping the pain would distract him from the shame that kept him bolted to his seat. Finally, he stood, head bowed. With a visible effort, he raised his head to address the crowd.

"My lady, for one year I have ridden and walked through your lands, and in that time not one adventure befell me. I have slain no monsters, nor have I won any tournament nor added any glory to your name or mine. I ask your forgiveness, and I congratulate Sir Blinor."

Tears welled in his eyes as he finished his speech, but Locris would not shame himself by weeping. So hard was he concentrating on maintaining his composure that he did not hear Lady Elena. He has halfway crouched into a sitting position when the page touched his arm.

"Our lady speaks."

"Sir Locris, I ask again. What became of the gold collar that you used to wear? Were you defeated and forced to surrender it as ransom?"

Locris straightened. "No lady. I gave it away, willingly."

"To whom?" asked the chief mage in a gravely voice.

"I had ridden but a single day when I came to a small house. A wagon was parked outside, and a gang of men was loading it with pigs and chickens, clothing and furniture.

"'What is this?" I asked. "Why do you ransack this house and seize these goods?"

The leader of the team of men spoke to me. "This is the home of an old woman. She's blind, she can't work, and she can't pay her taxes. I don't like it any more than you, but our Lady must pay her liabilities as well. We're confiscating these goods, that both debts be paid."

"Now, when I heard this, I knew my Lady Elena would never want to see any of her subjects so abused. So I took off my collar and handed it to the man, telling him to take it in lieu of all that the old woman owed and credit the rest of its value towards such taxes as she should owe to the end of her days."

Lady Elena blushed red, but said nothing.

"I could not help but notice," said the chief academician in her throaty alto, "that you said you had ridden and *walked* throughout our land. Pray, what became of your horse?"

"Madam, I rode until I came the very borders of our land. There I saw a field that was overgrown with weeds, and in it was a woman pushing a plow that was pulled by her husband and her son. I asked why they tilled the ground thus, and the lady told me their horse and ox had been stolen by raiders from across the border. Knowing that my Lady would never allow her subjects to suffer at the hands of her enemies, I gave them my horse to plough and plant with. Then I set out for home."

"Surely, though, it didn't take you an entire year to make your way back to this castle?" asked Lady Elena.

"No. I had walked but a few days when I came upon a young maid weeping. When I asked her why, she said her father, a soldier, had been slain in battle. Without his soldier's pay, she and her mother, her brothers and her sisters had no means of survival. I had nothing of value to give them, save my sword, and no true knight would ever part with his blade willingly. So I took up the father's old war ax, and worked for the fall as a woodcutter, supporting the family with my meager earnings. And never before have I worked so hard. When the time came for me to return to your castle, I left them with a bit of money and made my way home."

The Lady Elena rose, looking stern and splendid and gestured to the two knights.

"Sir Locris, Sir Blinor, come and stand before me. The time has come for the sword of my father to make its decision, which I have sworn to respect."

The two knights took their places, and Lady Elena drew the sword from its scabbard, then laid the naked blade on the table. As the crowd watched, not daring to breathe, an eerie, cold blue flame burst from the point, to run the length of the blade. The weapon began to vibrate before leaping off the table, hilt first.

Blinor grabbed for the sword and missed. As it spun towards him, Locris raised his hands as though to ward off a blow, yet somehow he found the blade heavy in his hand.

"There must be some mistake," sputtered Blinor, "I nearly caught it ..."

"That's right!" cried some of the younger knights. "Blinor should have caught it."

But Lady Elena shook her head. "No, the right man now wields my father's blade. For while Blinor has proven his courage in battle. Locris has shown his bravery by telling his story truthfully. He has embodied the knightly attributes of kindness, mercy, and chivalry towards the weak. More important, he has reminded me of my responsibilities as a ruler. "Together, as husband and wife, Locris and I will rule. We will see that no more property is confiscated to pay taxes. We will secure our borders, and then we will fight no more wars. And the families of the men who take up arms on my behalf will never fear want again. This I vow."

On the very next night, Lady Elena hosted another banquet to celebrate her betrothal. She and Locris were married: together they ruled happily and wisely for many years, and Sir Blinor served them ably as a general and champion for all his days.

Max Wright recently quit his copywriting job with an advertising and corporate communications agency to freelance and have more time to spend with his wife and three-year old son. Between assignments he teaches a college course on copywriting, plays soccer, and writes science fiction and fantasy. This is one of his first short stories, and he is currently working on a novel.

James Balkovek is a native Californian and a graduate of California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. An illustrator of numerous childrens and educational books, he has over twenty uears of illustration and design experience in commercial as well as editorial illustration. He runs BlackEagle productions, a graphic arts studio in central California with clients throughout the state.

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An Interview with Ellen Kushner

by Darrell Schweitzer

Ellen Kushner is the author of two highly-acclaimed fantasy novels, **SWORDSPOINT** and **THOMAS THE RHYMER.** The latter won the World Fantasy Award in 1991.

MZBFM: *Let's start with the obvious then: well, what about your long-awaited third novel?*

Kushner: *(Laughs.)* What about it?

Is there one?

Yes. I'm a good way into a first draft of a third novel. It's coming in stops and starts, depending on how active my radio career is. Currently the radio show that I do is one that is on national, public radio, courtesy of Public Radio International. It involves a great deal of research and a great deal of writing and editing. It probably takes eighty hours of people-power from me and a staff of three to get one hour that you hear on the radio every week.

So a lot of my energy and my time for writing — and for thinking, for that matter — is sucked up into this radio show, *Sound & Spirit.* Right now, in the winter of 1996, it's on 78 stations nationwide and growing. So I can't complain, but it does make it hard to get a whole lot done on the novel. (The *Sound & Spirit* website is **www.wgbh.org/pri/spirit**. Log on and hear my voice!)

I am sure that your readers have noticed and remarked on the fact that you've built quite a reputation with a very small body of work. Is this why it's so small?

Yes, it's why. When I wrote **SWORDSPOINT,** I was working in publishing in New York City. I quit my job to write the book, and it took a lot longer than I had intended, but I finally got it done and I sold it. Before **SWORDSPOINT** was published I wrote the draft of **THOMAS THE RHYMER** and at that point I decided, I've got to get out of New York City and I've got to get a job. I was writing "Choose Your Own Adventure"® books. I did five of those, to support myself while I was writing my novels, and I could see myself signing up for a sixth and I was thinking, I'm going to do nothing but write for money and I won't actually write any novels. So I've got to get a job. What do I want to do? I want to do radio. I want to play albums and talk about them, and not write for a living. I don't want to be sitting alone in a room all the time trying to write.

So I actually got a job in public radio, WGBH in Boston — and what was I doing but sitting in a room by myself, only I was playing albums instead of writing! But at least I wasn't writing as part of the job, and that was good, so I got the rewrites and revisions of **THOMAS** and I expanded them considerably. **THOMAS THE RHYMER** came out while I was still working in live-on-air radio. It was a pretty cosy gig because all I had to do was pick out music, talk about it, and play it, live. So I'd come in a couple hours before the show, frantically scramble for stuff, give myself an education in music — which I didn't know that well — and go on the air. Then I was done and I could go home.

But after a couple years of this, people at the station discovered that I could write. Big mistake. They started me writing scripts and I became the host of a national series on classical music. So there I was in radio, writing. It became noticeably harder for me to get writing done at home, because I was writing all day for radio. That was what started my downfall. I was writing a lot for the show and getting a lot of glory, and I was learning a lot. But it made it hard for me to write my novels. Then I got laid off a couple years ago, while my bosses frantically tried to find the money to start the show that's now on, *Sound & Spirit.* Suddenly, I had the time and I got a whole lot more done on the new novel.

It sounds like a fairly bold plunge you made there, quitting your publishing job. Had you sold anything at all before ***SWORDSPOINT****?*

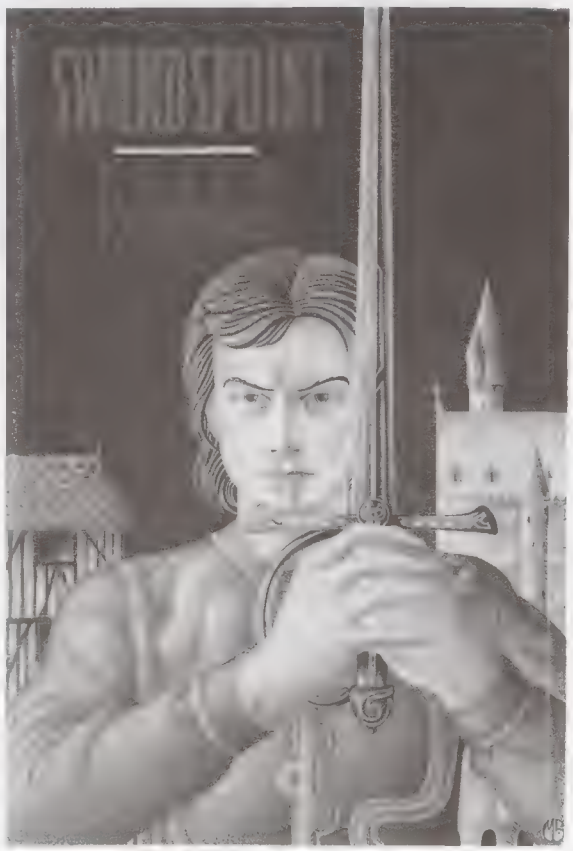
There were a couple of short stories. But I just ***had*** to do it. I just had to stop editing. I didn't enjoy it anymore. I was too conscious of the fact that I wanted to do writing instead of editing. I had always wanted to be a writer. I didn't want to be an editor, but it was the only job available to me. I knew

that I couldn't waitress, because I would be rude to people and drop things. So when you want to be a writer you can either waitress or you can go into publishing, I guess, or be a lumberjack... and I'm not very good with my hands. So I became an editor and I enjoyed it for a while, but at the point where I didn't enjoy it anymore, I knew it was time to bail out, so I did.

What I meant was that it strikes me as a brave thing to do, on the basis of a couple short story sales, to quit your job and then write a very unconventional first novel. ***SWORDSPOINT*** *is a fantasy with no overtly fantastic elements. It's set in a fantasy world, but there's no magic. Surely this must have caused some of the more generically-minded editors to start shaking their heads.*

Yeah, it did. It really did. I was very aware of the fact that I was not writing genre. But all I wanted to do was write this novel. I just needed to do it. Even though to a lot of people it seemed like a brave move, to me it was a desperate move. It would have taken more courage to stay in a job that wasn't making me happy than to take off and do what I really, really wanted to do.

And I just figured it would work out, and if it didn't I would write some more "Choose Your Own Adventure"® books. I was really surprised at how well **SWORDSPOINT** did, and so I think were the publishers who had turned it down, because they didn't realize that although it's very unconventional, it has a lot of stuff that makes people love fantasy: a real sense of being in another world, and very charismatic characters. I think that people often undervalue and don't appreciate what it is that fantasy readers are really looking for. I was not at all convinced myself that it was fantasy. I didn't tell people that it was a fantasy novel, but I was very grateful to the world of fantasy for taking it in and accepting it and, indeed, loving it. I really feel like I have a strong audience in that field and they love what I do, and I'm really glad of that. I'm glad to be feeding them something new. The new novel-in-progress is also set in the **SWORDSPOINT** world.



Dare we hope that fantasy readers want more than most publishers seem willing to give to them, that is something more than cloned trilogies, with original images and original language? In other words, something they haven't read before.

You know, there is more than one fantasy reader. There are people who really, really love cloned trilogies. I've taught writing. I've taught at Clarion and at the Odyssey workshops. I'm fascinated with what it is that people love. I don't want to name names, but my students who love my work (they tell me) and listen to my lectures on how to write great works of literature, come to me with genre fantasy and say, "This is really good. It's not like that other stuff." And I look at it and it's ***exactly*** like that other stuff. I don't know what they're seeing that I'm not seeing.

Or, I had a funny thing happen recently when I was teaching. I really dislike what I refer to as "funny names" in fantasy. If you're riding something that has four legs, a long tail, and a mane, ***call it*** a horse. Don't call it a nubuck. I don't see the point. If you're going to say, "I haven't seen you in a twelvemonth," it's a ***year***. I feel pretty strongly that this is true and makes better and more readable fantasy. Well, I was in class, and in the story we were critiquing, somebody gave somebody a penny. One of the students in the class didn't like the use of "penny". She said, "Can't you give it a different name so that it sounds more other-worldly? Couldn't you call it a King's Head or something?" And I jumped. I cringed. I said, "No. 'Penny' is good. Penny is better than 'King's Head'." But clearly, to this particular reader, it was what made it good for her, so who am I to argue?

I wonder if there might be something generational here. Any of us Baby Boomers can remember when there was virtually no fantasy available, whereas people who are in their early twenties now cannot. They have grown up with a saturation of paperback fantasies. We can remember when such books were very, very rare.

I'm definitely with you. One of the things that has really confused me about the whole fantasy field is that it changed under my feet in the time that I was reading fantasy and planning to be a great fantasy writer when I grew up, and the time I actually became a fantasy writer when I grew up. The fantasy that I idolized and wanted to be a part of was a lot of really good children's fantasy, which was usually where fantasy was on the shelves when I was a kid. You know, Tolkien and Edward Eager and people like that. And Le Guin, of course. I ***adored*** Le Guin. Then along came the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series that Lin Carter edited, some of which wasn't very good, but most of which was brilliant. To be like Peter Beagle was my highest wish. But by the time I was a fantasy writer, the word "fantasy" to most people did not mean Tolkien or Joy Chant. It meant stuff I don't actually think a great deal of. It was distressing.

It became a term of derision, sort of like "nurse novel."

(Ellen laughs.) Right, right. I think that when there's a whole lot of anything being written, some of it's good, some of it's bad. If we only want great fantasy, we're just not going to get that, because you're not going to get great anything. You don't get only really great detective novels. You get really bad ones and mediocre ones that you read in an afternoon and forget and you get great ones. It's not that detective novels themselves are bad.

The example that I often use for people who are genre-blind — they don't know from science fiction or fantasy. They have this notion that it's junk — I say that that's like

saying that all romance novels are junk. Now, are you talking about **JANE EYRE** or Harlequins? They both have basically the same tropes in them, and one's good and one's bad. The same is true of fantasy. You've got **JANE EYRE** and you've got Harlequins. People can enjoy them both, but you've got to know the difference.

It seems to me that the flood of mass-market paperback fantasy trilogies has had two detrimental effects. First, it discourages more ambitious or individual work. Second, paradoxically, the readers who have grown up with more fantasy than they know what to do with seem **less** *well-read, because they know only the knock-offs rather than, say, Peter Beagle or E.R. Eddison or Lord Dunsany.*

I don't know the answer to that because I'm not an editor anymore. So I don't know what the young writers are reading. I am not sure that discourages individual work. I'm not in any position to say that I couldn't get published, because I could. I think that anybody who does anything really original that's good, I trust, will get published eventually. I didn't get published right away. The editors were all my old friends. I knew everybody in publishing. They all read the book and they all said it was great, but they couldn't publish it — except my old boss, David Hartwell. I owe him a lot. He was really the one who took the chance. I am real grateful to him.

Wasn't ***SWORDSPOINT*** *published in England first?*

Actually, it was. I had almost forgotten that. Good for you for knowing that. At the World Fantasy Convention in Ottawa, whatever year that was — 1984.

I met the editor from Allen and Unwin and he was very cute. *(Laughs.)* So I struck up a conversation with him and said to him jokingly, "Would you like to read my novel?" and he said, "Yes," and we ended up having a great time at the convention together. I was just dying because this was Tolkien's publisher and I really idolized Allen and Unwin; and he ended up buying the book. Right after the convention I sent him off the manuscript, and he bought it. I was in shock. I was ***so*** happy and so excited. So indeed Allen and Unwin published the first edition, with a cover by a Canadian artist whom I had also met at that World Fantasy. He had in the show this gorgeous, gorgeous cover for what was in fact Guy Kay's first novel. There was this cover by Martin Springett, who was actually a British artist living in Canada. Unwin was so impressed that they gave me a Martin Springett cover as well. It didn't make it to America. Tom Canty did the first U.S. cover, but a lot of people come to me with the American hardcover, and they think they have a first edition, and I have to tell them that I'm sorry, but it was actually what was by then the Unwin Hyman edition that is the first.

Was the American edition bought on the basis of the British or did the British just coincidentally have it first?

No, the British had it first. I actually don't remember. No, the American was not bought on the basis of the British. I think it was just two separate deals. Or it happened very close together. But it was a separate sale. I had my agent by then and I am sure she oversaw things, so I'll have to ask her. Maybe she has her notes.

Getting back to what makes a good fantasy, there has to be a sense of another world, but there also has to be a sense of **this** world, *of basic realities. That's what's good about* ***THOMAS THE RHYMER****. The real is contrasted with the unreal. If you'd had a fake Scotland, your Elfland wouldn't have worked.*

Thank you. I guess in **THOMAS** I was really interested in contrasting the real world that Thomas and Gavin and Meg and Elspeth live in with the unreal world that he sees in Elfland. It may well be that for you, the Reader, the real world seems more real because you're seeing it contrasted with Elfland. I stayed pretty close to the earth in that one. I didn't do a vast amount of research. I just had some people living in a house on a hillside and I didn't get into the history of Scotland, and I didn't get into graphic detail of what it all looked like; but what was important was the feel of the place. If it felt like a real house, if it felt like the beams were solid and the earth was hard under your feet (or soft when it rained), that makes it seem more real. Also, for me, characterization is everything. I really believe that. If you have believable people, everything else becomes believable as well. So for me the focal point of that book was the human beings in it.

The other focal point, of course, was the balladry from which the story comes. It is a source which I'm surprised more people don't exploit. I am sure the book reads differently for people who are familiar with the original ballad. It gives the book a greater sense of, I suppose, music. How do you go about presenting such material to readers who are not, perhaps, familiar with it?

I should start by saying that I have been a ballad freak since I was a young teenager, when I first heard traditional ballad-singing by Ewan MacColl, a Scottish singer and collector of ballads. It was like nothing I'd ever heard before. I didn't like the sound of it at first because his voice was very rough and raw, but I think that the stories that he was telling as he sang really drew me in. You can get used to anything. So I got used to his voice and learned to love it. So I was fascinated with ballads and folklore and read as many as I could and collected books and collected albums, so by the time I wrote **THOMAS** ten years later or so, I was ready. I had it in my blood.

Now presenting this balladry to people who were not familiar with it was fun and easy because it simply formed the backbone of the world that these people lived in. In some

sense, as you said, the rhythms and patterns of the ballad are in these people's speech, in the way they think. So the ballads created the whole world for me. There are a certain number of in-jokes in there, for people who already know ballads, references I make, lines I steal out of ballads. I hope the ballad-freaks out there catch them and have a little chuckle, but I was always very careful to make sure that if you didn't know the reference I was making, the story would still make sense.

What was very amusing to me was the people who thought I'd made a lot of it up. I have not in fact made it up. Most of the material in the book actually comes from the ballads, so sometimes I feel that I get more credit than I deserve for invention. The truth is that I took it all from ballads and folk-tales.

What I have always found fun is to quote a genuine ballad, then incorporate a few spurious lines, to see if anyone can tell.

Do I do that?

I have. Have you?

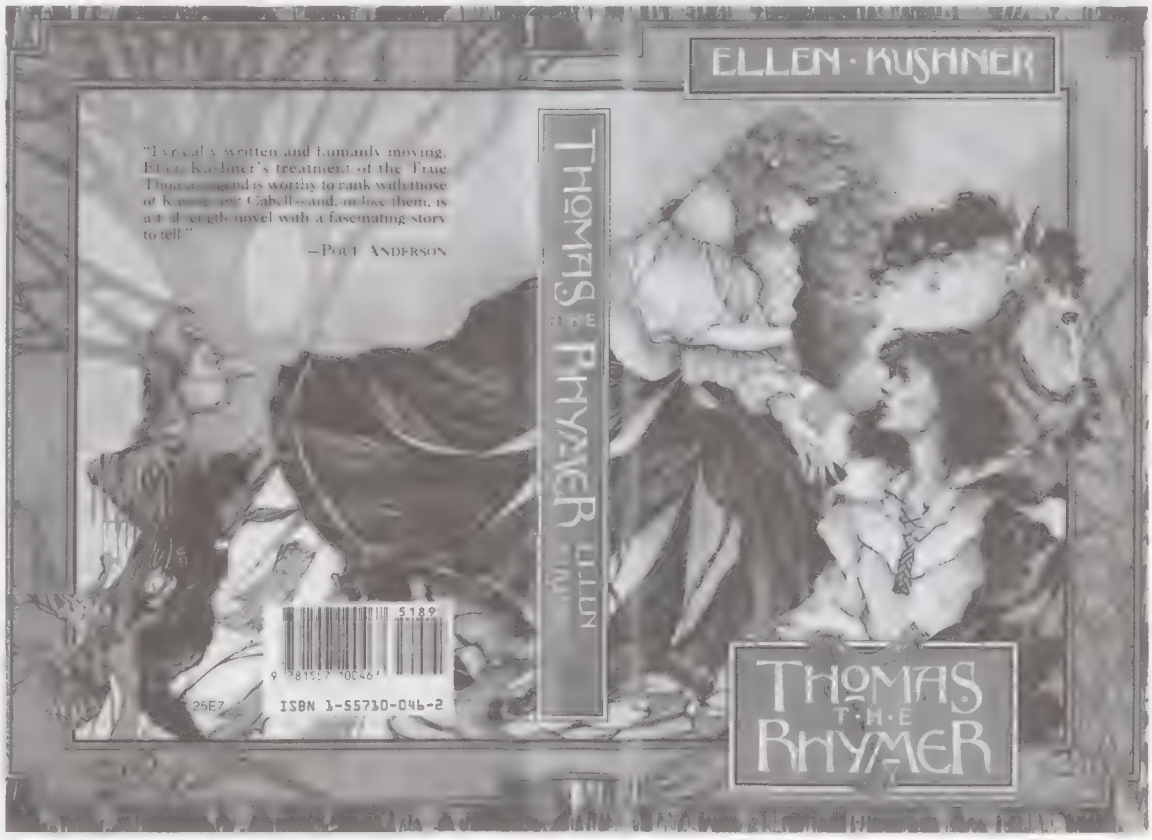
No, not on purpose. There were places in the book where I rewrote things, because it was all folklore, and who knows what it sounded like originally? There is in fact one ballad in there that I did write myself, completely. (It's on page 215.) I love writing in other styles and trying to take on the literary garments of another time and trade. The theater scene in **SWORDSPOINT** is my attempt to do, slightly a takeoff, but a realistic enough Jacobean drama. I had a great deal of fun doing that. And the ballad that Thomas sings near the end of the book about the lady of the lake, I wrote that. But, no, I'm not trying to fool anybody. I'm just trying to make it a good book.

What actually happens in Elfland in the book must have looked very strange in outline. It doesn't so much follow novel-logic as song-logic. One could well imagine it set in verse.

Thank you, very much. I am delighted to hear it. It did in fact have its own logic, and I barely knew what was happening. That was a real advantage to seeing it all from Thomas's eyes. He's the human being stranded in Elfland unable to speak to anyone. So he witnesses all these events without really understanding them. To me that is something that too few fantasy writers understand, which is that magic must be powerful and incomprehensible and bigger than we are. I think a lot of people now try to reduce it to the level of a Monopoly game, whereas to me the mythic power that magic has, and what makes it both believable and desirable is that it is bigger than we are.

I think it's also symbolic, in the sense that a Biblical vision is symbolic. It's huge and only partially comprehensible, but there is a meaning behind it, as there is in the vision of the dry bones in the ***BOOK OF EZEKIEL****.*

I don't think it's symbolic to the people who are actually experiencing it. In the book it's not symbolic. In the book it's very real. To the reader perhaps it is symbolic.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THOMAS THE RHYMER

One gets the sense from medieval romance that everything there has several levels of meaning. A few modern fantasy writers carry this sense over, but most of them have probably never read any medieval romance.

Another thing that I tried to give that time in Elfland in **THOMAS THE RHYMER** is a sense of dream. Things happen in a funny order. Time slows down and speeds up. Things aren't where they were a moment ago, as in a dream. It's very much a dream world that he's in. He's forced to treat it like a real world, and, I think, there's a kind of dream logic to some of the things that happen to him there. Dreams can be very powerful and very magical. You can wake up from a dream and feel like something ***really*** significant and important has happened to you and tell someone about it, and it doesn't make any sense and it sounds silly, but you know that there's a power there.

This is common in the ballads. They're very powerful and moving when set to music, but when analyzed as stories, they don't make any sense. Consider all the ones in which an evil man is going to murder a woman, but she says, "Wait, I have to take my fancy dress off before you push me in the river. Please turn your back." So he does and she pushes him in instead. This actually makes no sense. Do that in a mystery story and it would be silly. In a ballad it works. There's a different kind of logic going on.

Absolutely. There's ballad logic, and I love ballad logic, because it implies all sorts of things that aren't being said,

Photo by Alex Madonik

things you just know make sense.

The kind of fantasy we were talking about earlier, which reduces fantasy to a Monopoly game — frankly I think it is derived from role-playing games — tends to be very literal. In the ballad Thomas rides for a week through blood up to his knee, and nobody asks where all that blood came from or how he managed to stay in the saddle that long or why he didn't have to go to the bathroom. All of this doesn't matter.

Of course it doesn't matter. If that's what you're interested in, then this isn't the kind of book you should be reading.

My feeling has always been that, for all fantasy is sometimes criticized as failed realism, it is actually not realism at all. It is closer to allegory.

But the challenge for the writer is to make it feel real for the reader while it's lasting, to give it its own logic, its own credibility. I can't emphasize that too strongly. That's what makes a successful fantasy novel. Let's look at the two halves of that statement. It's fantasy, but it's also a novel. What we expect in a novel is something that mimics realism, even if it's the realism of a world with flying horses, it has to be believable at some level.

You've probably encountered this with students. They say, "Oh it's fantasy. Anything can happen there." And you know they're doomed.

They're doomed.

So, what **do** *you tell students about how to do this right?*

Oh, there are so many things I say. (Sometimes I say something that was great, then I forget it right away.) But I think that a lot of people get really scared either to trust their own instincts or to be strict with themselves. There's one bunch of people who say, "I'll never let a character walk away with the plot and I'll never write a line I haven't already thought of or allow a plot development I haven't already thought of." These are the control-freaks, the craftspeople. Then there are the people who go around saying *(assumes a high, vacuous-sounding voice)*, "Well, whatever comes to me, I just know is going to be right. Oh, my characters are just real people to me and I just let them do whatever they want." *(Resumes normal voice.)* I think that each of those things taken separately is a mistake. I think there are times when you have to ride the wild ride, to just go and keep going, to keep writing whatever comes into your head as long as it feels good, to let your characters be real people, to go with your instincts, trust your intuition. I think you are really cheating yourself and your art if you don't do that, ***but*** I think that then, after you've ridden the wild ride, and you see what you've got, that's when the craftsman has to come and do the work as well. You have to be strict with yourself and you have to look honestly at what you've got and see how it works. I do think, however, also that it's a big mistake to judge your work at all until it is finished. This is a lesson I need to keep reminding myself. Especially in a novel, you don't know until you've written the last page of the last draft precisely what shape it has, quite what is going to be useful in that book and what is not. So, don't make yourself crazy fixing an opening until you know what the ending is. Don't bog yourself in the middle unless you're rewriting something, because you don't quite know what the middle needs to look like until you know what the ending is. Please remind me of this.

What I always tell students is that it is far better to have a completed novel draft to revise than a very polished opening to a book you intend to finish someday.

But they hear that and go, "Oh yeah, sure." But there is a ***practical*** reason why it's really good to have a first draft. You suddenly have a map. I would say that when you're in the middle of a first draft you're trudging through a landscape and you can't see what's up ahead. You don't know if you're going to come to a river that you're going to need a boat for or maybe there's a bridge. Once you've got the first draft done then you're in a helicopter looking down over the whole landscape and you can say, "Aha! I'm going to have to build a bridge there, aren't I?" It's very, very helpful.

Are you an outliner or somebody who just plunges in?

I'm a plunger-inner. I like to write and find out what's going to happen next. But there gets to be a point where I get nervous or I simply need to know, and so sometimes I will be writing toward a particular point where I know X is going to happen, and I have several chapters to go before then and I'm fascinated to find how I get there. But I haven't written that many books. I don't know what I do. My technique is different every time.

How many short stories have you written? I think I've counted four.

It's more than ***four***. But it's not that many. I'd have to count them on my fingers. I have my bibliography, but if it's ten I'm doing well. I just published in a new story that came out last Fall in Peter Beagle's anthology **IMMORTAL UNICORN**. It was reprinted in **THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HOR-**

ROR for 1995. That's my latest. I had a story in Terri Windling's **THE ARMLESS MAIDEN**. It was a story I wrote for children, but Terri took it for **THE ARMLESS MAIDEN**, her childhood survivors anthology. Those are my most recent ones. I wrote a bunch of stuff for the "BORDERTOWN" series. It's more than four. And one thing I'm grateful for is that almost every short story I've published in the past five years has found its way into the Datlow/Windling **YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR** anthologies. So it's great for me that they get a wider audience and the editors think I'm good enough to put in there.

Are you most likely going to turn out to be primarily a novelist?

Yes. My heart really belongs to novels. More than one person has said that most of my short stories read like chapters from a novel. I think that's okay, but it's true. Actually the newest thing that I have coming out is some collaborations with Delia Sherman that are also set in the **SWORDSPOINT** city. But Delia is what she calls a "recovering academic" and so she wanted to write about the university there. So I said, "Sure, do it." So she thought up a character there, and I thought up a character from my end of town and we have them involved in an affair. That story is coming out in January 1997 from White Wolf in an anthology called **BENDING THE LANDSCAPE**. I had a great time collaborating with her. We had a hundred pages of the story and we had to stop and shrink it down, but I think we're going to take the hundred pages and turn it into a novel. It's really fun when you can write with someone else because it goes much faster and it turns into much more of a social event, which is something writing never is, because it's such a lonely deal. So that's a new direction for me and something I'm enjoying, and also something that's expanding the **SWORDSPOINT** world for me in really delightful ways.

How far is this series going to go?

Pretty far. I'm having so much fun. Delia and I delved into the early history of the city, back to the time of the kings, and we found out some of very interesting things involving the ancient kings and their wizards. The story we're writing refers back to those. But the novel we're planning to do takes places about sixty years after **SWORDSPOINT**, and it involves a whole generation, to whom the people of **SWORDSPOINT** are just a legend. It's a lot of fun. The novelist I am taking for my model for this is Anthony Trollope, the 19th century British writer. He wrote "the Palliser" series, which was done on *Masterpiece Theater*. He wrote thousands of pages about the city of London in his own day, populated by imaginary families from the high to the low. One book will be about one family, but the family from another book will be in little scenes talking about them. I'm enchanted by this. I think it's tons of fun and I'm actually going to do it. For a while I felt, Oh, I shouldn't write sequels, because that's just too trashy. But I don't write trash. And it's a good time. I think that writing should be fun. I really do. I think the notion that you have to suffer to write is overrated.

Let's finish up with a little more about the novel you're currently working on.

This mythical third novel — I've actually read sections from it at conventions now — takes place twenty years after **SWORDSPOINT**, and it is mostly narrated by a fifteen-year-old girl who is Alec's niece. So everybody in **SWORDSPOINT** is still alive, but they're all older and quite different from the novel, and the viewpoint of a teenaged girl really changes your view of what's going on. I'm really enjoying it.

Anything else?

Oh! I ***completely*** forgot to talk about **THE HORNS OF ELFLAND**!

Then talk.

It's an anthology about music and fantasy, edited by me, with Donald G. Keller and Delia Sherman, to be published by Roc in May 1997. It's great stuff. There are new stories by John Brunner, Michael Kandel, Susan Palwick, Terri Windling, Gene Wolfe, Jack Womack, and many others. Also, I have a new story in it, "The Death of Raven", which is a folktale-ish thing — about yet another minstrel — one of those stories that came to me all in a burst, so that I could hardly write it down fast enough. Which, as you know, is something that happens seldom, and is a real gift. Although I wrote it years ago, I never sent it anywhere — it was waiting for the right place to come along, and, fortunately, **THE HORNS OF ELFLAND** was exactly the right place.

Thank you, Ellen.

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Ellen admires poster of her first book at Dark Carnival Bookstore, Berkeley

Photo by Alex Madonik

An Ellen Kushner Bibliography

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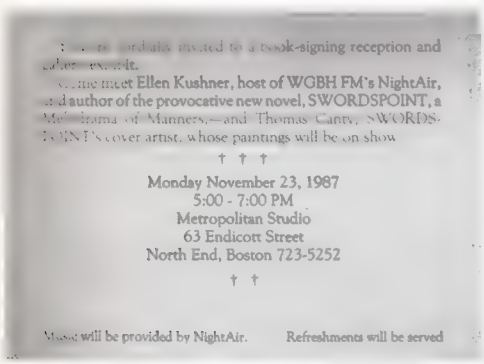

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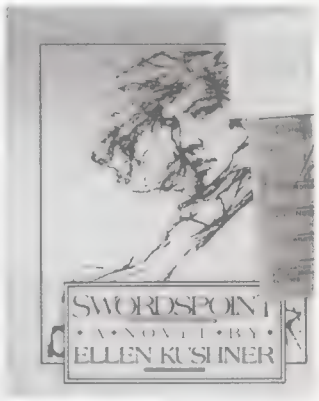

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A special Cauldron ballot is on page 64. Please give us your comments. Thanks!

Letters

Julia E. Linthicum, Arlington VA

Have you considered reprinting Karen Anderson's "The Theban Fix" in one of the **BEST OF** anthologies? I really enjoyed "A Sphinx in the Mind", especially the appearance of the No Such Agency.

I love the new logo in the corner of the magazine cover. I noticed it immediately when I found my copy at the bookstore. I thought, "They changed the cover somehow." And the endnote provided the answer. Anyway, it's not only very stylish, but it also serves the purpose it was intended for. (On an Internet note, you might consider using the logo to help spruce up the Web site. Your site is very text heavy and even a small logo or picture will help brighten things up.)

By the way, I know this isn't purely fantasy, but Rosemary Edghill *[eluki bes shahar]* has also written two mysteries, **SPEAK DAGGERS TO HER** and **BOOK OF MOONS**, both currently in paperback from Tor Books, starring Bast, a witch.

The logo was designed with the web in mind, in fact, and copies will appear there soon. (I want to figure out how to use a greyscale version as "wallpaper" for at least the first page.)

We plan to put "The Theban Fix" in a future "best of" anthology, but that is contingent on having a publisher contract for the anthology, of course. We don't have a contract for another volume yet.

There's a third Edghill mystery featuring Bast, available only in hardcover right now: ***THE BOWL OF NIGHT****. —REH*

Karen Dunlap, Olympia WA

I have finally given in to my secret, long buried desire to write, but I have a question about a specific problem I am having with my characters. When reading my work, my characters seem like two-dimensional cardboard cutouts — flat and predictable. I think my work habits are spilling over: I work for the government and have to write concise, easy-to-understand letters of explanation to constituents (and pride myself at being good at that). I find myself using short, non-descriptive sentences that do not seem conducive to the kind of fiction I like to read and would like to write. How do I enliven my characters and make them more likeable? Can you recommend any exercises of some sort?

Take at look at Ann Sharp's recent column on creating sympathetic characters, and Heather's column in this issue on "Show, Don't Tell". Both should give you ideas for starters. -- REH

Gary Helfrich, Fort Wayne IN

Your magazine has the best format, art, and story quality of all of the fiction magazines. It is a shame that the magazine has not been honored with a Hugo. It gets my vote!

Greg Koster, Bremerton WA

I've fallen way behind on my reading, and did not send in ballots for the last couple of Cauldrons, thinking they would be far too late to do any good. Perhaps you could put a deadline underneath the "one ballot per reader" line. This might prod people to get going.

[Normally, cauldron results are tabulated in the next issue, so a good rule of thumb is to get them in within two months of receiving your copy. —HR]]

Here's some ideas for editorials and the writer's column:

The increasing tendency for teams of three to produce novels. I'm a little suspicious of such work (and yes, I know MZB has done this on occasion) on the theory Hollywood produces many of its screenplays this way. Could anything more damning be said? What are the advantages to three? It is hard enough to get two people to agree.

Sympathetic characters redux. Why the prescription for sympathetic characters who sound virtuous and dull? Someone with a flaw may indeed be a character who holds the reader's interest. Look at Harry Harrison's Slippery Jim diGriz. His flaws would fill the Queen Mary and sink it, yet he's an engaging rogue (whom I'd run like blazes away from in real life).

Ever thought of producing an index, the way *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, and *Analog* do? I would find this helpful. All we have now are the descriptions of the back issues for sale which a) do not cover all the issues; and b) seldom have a third of the pieces in an issue.

We have an index; if you'd like a copy, request one and send us a sase with enough postage for two ounces. And the index will be up on our web page soon. -- REH

Betty Roberts, Yuma AZ

Thank you for reading my story. I especially appreciate the note from both of you to ditch my dot-matrix printer. My daughter said, "I told you so!" Now I have a HP Laser Jet and now ALL I have to do is write something that will sell.

The proper tools aren't everything, but they are essential. — MZB

Wayne Lloyd, Calgary Alberta

There is a contradiction (I think) between Writer's Digest's 1996 **NOVEL & SHORT STORY WRITER'S MARKET** and your guidelines. The guidelines state that children's stories are not welcome, but the Writer's Digest book says you are looking for stories which are appropriate for "young adult/teen (10-18)".

While I can understand the confusion, I don't feel that the two statements are contradictory. There is a difference between a "children's story" and a "story appropriate for young people to read". One is aimed specifically at children and will not generally appeal to adults, the other simply considers children part of the potential audience. Unlike some editors, I don't feel that adult readers will necessarily dislike stories that lack explicit sex, strong language, and gratuitous violence. There is a middle ground of work written for adult readers yet unobjectionable as children's reading. The short answer is that we are neither a "kiddie" magazine nor an "adult" (in the euphemistic sense) magazine. — MZB

Grace Gaffney, Yucca Valley CA

Jo Clayton went into my prayers the minute I read your memo. I've survived three cancers and I know anything is possible. In which issue did you do a Jo Clayton interview? Did you ever?

We hope to publish an interview with Jo in one of our 1997 issues. -- REH

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Marion Zimmer Bradley
Talks to Writers:
Why Did My Story Get Rejected?

Or, "Darn it, my story is certainly as well written as some of what they print every issue, so why did they buy his story and send mine back with a printed slip?"

The first sad truth about marketing fiction of any kind is this, and you are just going to have to deal with it:

Editors do not buy stories because they are well written.

Accept it. Memorize it. Put it up over your typewriter (or your computer). Yes, it's unfair. And editors have no objection to "well written" stories. Between two salable stories, one well written and one badly written, most editors would rather buy the one that is better written. But if an editor has a well written story that does not meet her requirements, and a **badly** written story that **does** meet her requirements, she will buy the badly written story that does meet her requirements. Whether or not you sell your story has **nothing to do with how well you write, or how beautiful your prose**. People who have no "writing ability" are making a good living at writing, and people who write very well indeed have nothing but a collection of rejection slips and some compliments on their writing style. (Of course, if you write well, you can **learn** the rest.)

One of the hardest things a young writer, one who has made maybe two or three sales, but cannot sell regularly, must cope with is distinguishing between the story which sells first time out and the other story he or she has written, which is just as "good" but for one reason or another does not sell, even though the writer reads it over and over again, bemused, and cannot imagine what is wrong with it, when it is certainly "just as good or better" than his first sale.

Editors do not buy stories because they are well written, so what does that #$%&*' editor want, anyway?

If editors do not buy stories because they are well written, why **do** they buy stories, then? Why did **my** story get rejected?

Editors reject stories for all kinds of reasons. Some of them (and I'll deal with them later) have nothing to do with how good or bad a story is. The main reason an editor rejects a story is this:

Editors reject stories, good and bad, because they feel that the particular story will not give their readers the kind of specific reading experience they want or expect in that particular magazine.

In order to sell a story it is not necessary to learn to write well. Once one learns to write a literate English sentence, the ability to sell a story is based on only one talent: the ability to give an editor what her readers want.

A story may be bad in all kinds of ways, and still be salable, it if has some things the editor finds important (because she knows from experience that this is what her readers want.) But a story may be good in all kinds of ways, excellently written, with warm, lovable characters and wonderful style, plus a philosophical outlook which would make you the new Mark Twain or Jane Austen, and it is still going to get rejected if it doesn't give the editor those few things the editor wants and needs.

Editor's Reasons for Buying a Story:

1. The editor knows it will give the reader a Satisfying Reading Experience of the kind his magazine was intended to provide.
2. The story has a clear-cut, likable character with whom the reader can identify.
3. The story tells, and solves, a clear-cut narrative problem which the main character solves by his or her own efforts.
4. The story makes the reader glad he read it, therefore giving the reader a (see #1 above) Satisfying Reading Experience.

* * *

An editor is just a person who is hired by the owners of a magazine because he or she has the experience and know-how to tell a story that **will** give a Satisfying Reading Experience from one that won't. If the editor does this, the magazine will sell. If the editor doesn't, and buys only "well written stories", the sales go down and the editor gets fired for someone who knows how to deliver the product the publisher is selling — magazines people will read. Obviously, the reader of a confession magazine is going to want a different kind of Satisfying Reading Experience than the readers of say, *Fearful Fantastic Fables*, or *Terrific Technology Tales*... and the readers of *FFF* would sneer at the stories bought by the editors of *TTT*, or worse, yawn at them, which is why John W. Campbell would not have made a good editor for ***Weird Tales***, and vice versa.

So the writer who wants to make a living as a writer of commercial fiction, by **selling** what he writes (and I cannot emphasize enough that this has **nothing whatever** to do with "talent", "literary ability", or "quality creativity", and even less with "self expression" or "creative writing") must learn to give the editor what he wants, or at least what he **thinks** he wants. If you want to "be a good writer", resign yourself to writing for little literary journals, and maybe when you have been dead for fifty years there will be a posthumous collection of your works and somebody will write a doctoral thesis about them. If you want to **sell**, learn to give the editor what he wants. That done, you can be a good writer if you want to. But if you can't do that **first**, the public will never have the chance to judge your work unless you publish it yourself. Of course editors are often wrong. They are wrong all the time, which is why every issue of ***Locus*** carries an announcement that such-an-editor has been fired from, or left, some magazine or publishing house, to be replaced by so-and-so. But right or wrong, they are the only people who can buy your stories.

And very often editors themselves do not know (or do not have the time to tell you) why they rejected your story; because, very often, editors have no talent except the ability to tell, by a gut feeling or their own instincts, why they feel one story will "work" and another one won't. They fall back on such statements as "your story is too weak...too slight... doesn't work somehow..." but it all adds up to "I won't buy it," and another rejection slip to add to the writer's bafflement and "What the heck does he mean? What does the editor want anyhow?"

When I started editing anthologies, I tried very hard to analyze the "gut feelings" I had about why one story worked and another one didn't, and I made up a form letter so I wouldn't have to write the same letter to about two hundred would-be contributors. In general, I rejected stories for one or more of the reasons outlined on the following page, and this had nothing to do with how well-written the stories were.

Editor's Reasons for Rejecting a Story:

1. **The pace of the story was wrong.** You were trying to write a novel in fourteen pages, with enough characters, action and crisis packed in to destroy a planet or bring down a society. Or, conversely, you were trying to string out a little gimmick or "idea" which might have made a good "short short" into eighteen or twenty pages or more. (I should add that this is the most common reason for rejection.)

2. **The story was not complete in itself.** A lot of otherwise good stories read like the first chapter in a novel, with a major problem left unsolved and the reader wanting to know "What happened after that?" Granted that many stories, especially stories in a series, can leave a window open for the writer to tell more about those same people. But if this is so blatant that the reader is left unsatisfied and fretting about unfinished business the editor has no choice but to reject.

3. **Your main character was not identifiable. The editor didn't know whose story you wee telling or the main character was not likable enough for the reader to want to identify with him or her** — a bastard should be a lovable bastard. **Or there were so many characters the editor couldn't keep them all straight.** In general, a story with fewer than ten pages should have only one main character, a minor character, and maybe a couple of "walk-ons". A story of twenty pages or more can have four or five characters but should have only one viewpoint character. Also, it should be easy to keep all the characters straight... you should not, for instance, as I did once, have a Helen, an Ellie, and a Nell in the same story! Or name all three of your male characters James, Jacob, and John, unless they are triplets.

4. **The editor could not get interested enough in the characters** to care whether they solved their problems or not. I tend to test a mystery story by walking away from it about fifty pages from the end and asking myself "Do I really care who killed Uncle?" If the answer is **no**, I don't finish it.

5. **Nothing much happened in the story.** You gave some interesting episodes, and some nice things happened to some moderately nice people, but when everything was finished, nothing much had changed and the characters were right back where they were before. In short, it didn't add up to that Satisfying Reading Experience. It must have satisfied **you**, or you wouldn't have written it, but an editor is paid to know whether it will satisfy, say, 100,000 people, and if he buys too many that won't, he gets fired. If you believe in your story, if the most honest introspection produces no lingering doubts, try a different magazine, or try that one after that particular editor gets fired; maybe if he had bought your story he would still be there.

6. **The character did not have a serious enough problem** (paper tiger) or **did not solve it by her own efforts** (Cinderella's Fairy Godmother came along and sent her to the ball). In the old Greek dramas, a god came down out of the sky and explained why all the trouble had happened and how to put it right. Also, check to see if your story is an idiot plot — a plot which works only because everybody in it keeps acting like an idiot when a little common sense would unwind it all. (This is the detective story where everybody carefully doesn't tell the police everything they know because then the story would be over.)

7. **The story was just too grim or downbeat...** too depressing, too bloody, too littered with unrelieved tragedy, too scattered with corpses, too sadistic. Obviously stories like this do sell sometimes, usually as horror movies or paperbacks, where the evil triumphs and everybody lives unhappily ever after, but choose your market carefully. Even **ROSEMARY'S BABY** had a few funny bits in it, so the reader could catch his or her breath. (But there's always Dean Koontz, whose work is **very** grim.)

a. **The story was offensive, or the editor thought it was offensive.** This may, of course, simply be a matter of taste. I rejected a story whose major punch was scatological because

I personally am offended by bathroom humor. You can always find another editor whose standards are different. Or maybe the editor is just too prudish, in which case try after she gets fired.

Nine out of ten stories which get rejected fall into one or another of these eight categories; there is some big hole in the plotting of your story, or it is told in a way which is unclear, confusing or offensive to your editor's idea of his preferred reader. (For instance, back when the editors believed that 99% of the readership was white, male, and adolescent, any story whose main appeal was, for instance, to women would be turned down automatically. Times, and readerships, have changed, and editors who don't please the new readership, at least 40% female, are now out of work and haunting the breadlines or editing porno mags.)

But there is always the tenth story, which has absolutely nothing wrong with it, but gets rejected anyway for one of the following reasons. You can say it isn't your fault, but in a very serious way it **is** your fault, because most of these "no-fault" rejections are **preventable**.

No-fault rejections:

Or, Why really good stories get rejected:

1. **The editor couldn't read your story** because it was typed with a dim ribbon, or a sloppy unreadable Xerox,* or because your spelling was so bad he didn't want to be bothered figuring out what you meant. Or the editor never got a chance to read your story because you didn't address it right, or because the label fell off and it went to the dead letter office. Or he read it, and loved it, but he never got a chance to tell you so because you hadn't put your real name and address on the story, only on the envelope, and the envelope got thrown away in the mailroom.** Or he couldn't write you and tell you about it because you didn't send enough postage and his magazine has a firm policy not to answer any manuscripts not accompanied by return postage.

2. **The story was a pretty good, well-plotted story**, but this particular editor doesn't buy sword and sorcery, or high-technology space opera, or post-doomsday stories, or horror stories. Next time, **read the market requirements.**

3. **The story was a pretty good story** but the editor just didn't happen to like the end, and he wasn't goshwow enough about it to write and ask if you would mind changing it.

4. **The story was a pretty good story** but your opening was a little slow and the editor got bored before he could find out how good it was and ask you to change the first page a little.

5. **The story was a perfectly good story** but something in this story pushed one of the editor's personal buttons — maybe she is a devout Roman Catholic and the story spoke favorably about abortion, or she is a dedicated environmentalist and the story dealt with something which hit one of her personal fears, neuroses, or emotional convictions. Granted, editors should be above all this kind of thing; but editors are only human. It's even possible that you had a character in the story who reminded the editor of her hated stepmother, her rotten aunt Minnie, or the college professor who flunked her out of Integral Calculus and wrecked her chances of getting into grad school, which is why she's an editor. Try another editor.

6. **The story was a perfectly good story** but the editor was going to press tonight and needed a story exactly 7500 words long to fill a spot vacated by an ad that canceled or a column that missed its deadline, and your story was 8500 words long. Or she needed a story 10,000 words long and yours was only 7500.

7. **The story was a perfectly good story** but the editor had just bought another story on the same theme by Harlan Ellison, Ben Bova, or Ursula LeGuin. Tough luck, and that's the breaks.

8. **The story was very good**, but you had stepped on the editor's corns, literally or figuratively, at a drunken party in Chicago four years ago and she wouldn't buy it if you were the greatest writer since the last Pulitzer Prize winner.

Of course it is all too easy, when the editor sends back your story, to flatter yourself that your story is really pretty good, and that it was rejected for one of the these no-fault reasons.

In general, your first dozen or three rejections will be for cause — your story just isn't well enough plotted, the characters are too tangled, the plot doesn't make sense, there is something wrong with the end or the beginning, or for some reason the editor just can't care enough about your characters.

The difference between the amateur and the professional is that the professional **assumes** that the editor knows her job, and if his story is rejected, he must have done something wrong. (And once an editor respects you as a professional and assumes **you** know your job, she will **tell** you if it's not your fault — "Dear Joe — sorry, this is too long for me," or "I'm overbought this month," or "I just bought three stories about sentient garbage dumps and can't use another.") The amateur always assumes his story is good and the editor just doesn't appreciate genius.

The art of the writer is to know the difference between the story that doesn't sell because it's a lousy story, and the one that doesn't sell because the editor is a lousy editor.

Sure, try your story again if it's rejected. But if it's rejected **everywhere**, assume there was some reason nobody liked it, and try another story ... and listen to that sneaking little voice that tries to tell you where that first one really fell apart. ⁂

* or because the stroke weight used by your laser printer is too light (translation: "the letters were too spidery") -- *reh*

** Mostly in this case nobody will read your story at all, it will just land in the recycling bin. -- *reh*

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Writers Talk Back:

Show Me

(or, Sometimes We're All From Missouri)

by Heather Rose Jones

If you have spent any time in the field of writing, some reader will have critiqued one of your works with the phrase (perhaps scrawled in red across your manuscript) "Show, don't tell!" Ironically enough, while writers are often *told* this, they are rarely *shown* what is intended by it. No doubt, each editor or writing instructor has her or his own notion of what the command means — I can only share my own view.

Let's look at an example of the sort of writing that would provoke this response from me.

"Marina played her harp in the marketplace every morning. It brought in only a few coppers, but it kept her from starving and sometimes put a roof over her head at night. The people of the town were not overly fond of her foreign-sounding tunes — those who stopped to listen at all when they noticed the amber-colored eyes that marked her as one of the wandering *tallini* that sometimes came through town."

The passage has established some useful background facts. We know our protagonist's name, gender, profession (such as it is), eye color, economic status, and something about her ethnic origin and their relations with the local community. Information is useful — but a story is not about information. Ideally, a story will make you feel things, not just know them, and will do it in such a way that you don't realize you're being *told* those things. Try to include background information in casual references. People are really very good about picking up on hints. So let's pretend the reader already knows everything about the setting and go back and plunge into the middle of the action.

"When Marina heard the clink of copper in the bowl before her, she raised her eyes from the harpstrings without thinking. Her gaze met that of the man who had tossed the coin and, too late, she looked down at her hands again. Her benefactor hissed, "*Tallini!*" and turned away, taking most of her audience with him. She set her jaw and tried to coax them back with a dance tune she often heard spilling out of the tavern near the alley where she slept. But under her fingers it twisted into something foreign, no more at home among these market stalls than she was."

The second passage actually gives you a little less information than the first, but which leaves you wanting to know what happens next? Which one makes you feel as if you were there? Very often, less can be more in storytelling. The more you induce the reader to use her imagination in filling in the factual gaps, the more story you can pack into your page. The reader's imagination can be one of the most powerful tools at a writer's disposal. Which of the following conveys more menace? "He heard the Girnix snuffling at the door and the dry scrape of its claws on the wood." or "It was a Girnix, the most dangerous beast in the forest, with claws that could slice through a half-inch oak plank."

But there is more to "showing" than choosing to hint rather than spell things out in detail. An important part is getting as close as possible to your viewpoint character. Experience the world through his or her senses. We aren't just told that a man threw a coin in the harper's bowl, we know it because she heard it. Tell us what your characters hear, see, and smell. This isn't a license for all manner of purple prose describing irrelevant details, but rather a suggestion that *when* there is information to convey, try to convey it through your character's senses.

"The dragon flew low over the flock and snatched up a ram from under the shepherd's nose, leaving the man grateful that *he* hadn't ended up as the dragon's dinner."

versus

"There came a deep hollow booming that shook his bones, like the snapping of an enormous sail. He shivered as a shadow crossed the sun; finally he thought to look up. His dog was barking madly — faintly, as if through a long distance — as the great wings cut through the air towards him. There was no time, no place to run. Like an osprey skimming the surface of a lake, the claws reached down into the flock with never a break in the beat. There was a scream, such as he had never heard from a ram's throat before, then silence, as the dust swirled up in sulfur-tinged eddies in the creature's wake." (Did you notice I never used the word "dragon" in this passage?)

Classic folk-tale formulas tend to be heavily into "telling" rather than showing. "Once upon a time there was a princess who lived in a tall stone castle." This is *telling*. It conveys no information beyond the existence in the story of a princess and a castle. The same information can be conveyed simply by using the words "princess" and "castle" and cutting directly to the chase. "From the narrow window-slit of the castle, the princess could see a thin column of dust approaching along the road." This sentence not only establishes the same facts *and* introduces the action, but it also literally puts the reader into the princess's point of view.

Above, I suggested that this kind of "getting into your character's head" was a good way to show, rather than tell, external events, but sometimes the apparent reverse is true. When indicating your character's emotions and reactions, it can be more effective to do this by describing her actions and letting the reader draw his own conclusions. Instead of, "Johanna was embarrassed and furious at the man's presumption," what about, "Johanna rose from the table slowly, her fingers white-knuckled on the arms of her chair. 'You have no right!' she spat at the man who stood before her."

A useful side-effect of trying to write from your character's head is that it can help you keep track of the difference between what you, as the author, have to tell about the action and what the character knows, and can show, about what's going on. Maybe you, as the all-knowing author, can explain, "Torvi had a hard time expressing affection because he had been physically abused as a child." But if you say it in as many words, you're jerking the reader into a modern psychological-theory mindset. Does your character live in a

culture where the concept of "child abuse" even makes sense? Does he have the mental tools to analyze his own emotions and reactions in this way? If not, how about, "When she came and laid her hand on his shoulder, Torvi flinched away without thinking. Then he saw the hurt in her eyes and wished he could ease it — as he had long ago wished for someone to ease his own hurts." More is left to the imagination, but if the characters are acting in realistic ways, readers will recognize the patterns and draw their own conclusions.

One of the areas where "telling" tends to be most egregious in fantasy writing is in the introduction of invented societies, peoples, technologies, and the like. You've done a lot of hard work coming up with these things — you want to share it with the reader, so that he will properly understand what's going on in the story. That's a mistake, a bad one. This is more than a matter of the "iceberg" lesson (i.e., what you know goes below the waterline; what you write goes above it); it's a matter of writing a *story*, not an anthropological report. Let's suppose you have a group of sorcerers who "store" spells in braided cords for future use. Does each of the following provide you with the essential information? Does each move the story efficiently?

"On the pommel of her saddle was coiled a braided tape, the ends left loose and unfinished. Each strand gave its particular virtues to the whole, and the choice of materials would determine the purpose to which it could be put. She opened one of the saddlebags and considered the threads at her disposal: yellow silk dyed with saffron — that was for strength and health; fine blue woolen thread — that was for guarding against the spells of others; her fingers passed over the roughly spun nettle fibers — she had no need of transformations today; a delicate rose-madder colored thread spun from cat-hair put the wisdom of the Ancients at her disposal."

or

"As she rode, Ielish braided a spell-cord, looping the work over her pommel as it grew. An old child's rhyme played through her head as her fingers moved unconsciously. 'Gold for gaining; blue for truth; nettle's changing; rose is ruth.' It wanted a bit of Corlanian purple, but with luck she could trade for that at the next encampment."

From an emotional point of view, the essence of "show don't tell" is that the reader should walk away feeling she has experienced the story rather than read it. Your greatest ally in this process is the reader's own knowledge and imagination. Don't tell him things that he either knows or can figure out for himself — show him the dirty dishes and he will know there has been a meal. Don't tell her what your characters are thinking and feeling — show her how they act on those thoughts and feelings and she will believe it all the more.

❄

Heather Rose Jones is the Publisher's Assistant at Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine (although after this issue she is leaving us for fulltime work on her doctorate in linguistics). She is a longtime member of the Society for Creative Anachronism where she holds numerous awards, a harpist, an artist, a costumer, and a former owner of a music publishing business. She recently sold her first novel. She lives in Oakland, California.

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Hillbilly Charm

by Dan Guynn, Jr.

alfour sprang gleefully from rock to log to leaf-covered slope. Just ahead he spied the silvery glow of his own tracks lighting the cloak of night for those who could see them. With a final hop his short, spry body landed on the very point from which he had started the long loop nearly an hour ago.

Turning his wrinkled head so one large, droopy ear faced the path behind him, he listened intently. Finally the mournful bay of a blue-tick hound whispered from far away. Almost too far away. These big city coon hunters couldn't track through the wooded mountains of southwestern Virginia like the locals could. The locals weren't this much fun, though; they all knew to stay away from this end of the mountain, where Balfour had grown a comfortable but lonely home in his middle centuries.

He had led the hunters and their dogs over the ridge to the south slope, several miles from his home, before circling around to befuddle them. The hounds sounded again, closer now, and Balfour knew they hadn't lost the track. He grinned. Squeezing the raccoon's muzzle shut with one hand and holding its sharply clawed paws together with the other, he lifted the squirming animal off his shoulders and rubbed it roughly against a limestone boulder and the striped trunk of a mountain maple. Then he hurled it through the air to his right, well outside the loop he had traced.

The raccoon landed with a thump in a rhododendron thicket and scrambled to its feet, glaring at the elf with pure hatred.

"@!&***!" screamed the raccoon.

"Yew say that agin and I'll bind ye to the path, boy," said Balfour. "Them hunters will foller it 'round for hours. Yew orter run, while ye still can."

The raccoon considered its options and ran away, whispering faint vulgarities.

Balfour whistled as he trotted toward home. The hunters would eventually realize they'd been tricked and head down the south slope, right through Dalziel's woods. The aggravation would serve the old elf right. Just because he'd caught Balfour flirting in a moment of lonely weakness with Dalziel's wife was no reason to spread that nasty lie about Balfour's departed father. Pa never would have taken a human lover.

On Rattlesnake Ridge, he paused to consider his path. The longer route descended to the mouth of the hollow here and then upstream past McGlowry's cabin to the cove and the chestnut oak he called home. The night was still young, and an unmarried elf with no romantic prospects had few responsibilities. He turned downhill.

Half-way up the hollow, he came to a four-room, board-and-batten cabin. Even Balfour's keen eyesight could barely make out the few remaining flecks of white paint that clung tenaciously to the pores of the old chestnut planks. The lights were out, as he'd expected; the old woman rose and set with the sun.

Humming, he sauntered over to the outhouse and stooped down, pressing his back to the rear wall. Muscles bulged in his thighs. The building tilted forward, but slowly. Was he getting *that* decrepit in his 350's?

"Wah!" came a cry from inside the outhouse. "The haints are after me!" The front door opened, and out stumbled old lady McGlowry, hitching her bloomers up under her skirt with one hand and hobbling on her walking stick with the other. The now lightweight building pitched forward rapidly, and Balfour barely avoided falling into the noxious pit he'd just uncovered. He froze in place on one knee and flung a glamour upon the woman.

Illuminated capitals by Margaret Davis

She would soon wander back to her cabin, thinking her business had gone undisturbed until the dawn revealed otherwise.

McGlowry pushed her thick glasses up on her beak of a nose. She peered into the darkness to his left. Balfour knew her cataract-riddled eyes couldn't see much even in the daytime, let alone on a moon-less night. He straightened up to go.

McGlowry's head turned his way. Peering harder, she looked directly at him. "Well, I'll be! A fairy!" she said, and swung the hardened hickory stick toward Balfour's head.

He was so stunned he barely dodged it in time.

"I ain't no damn fairy!" he screamed. "And I ain't no 'haint', neither! I'm an elf!"

She pointed her stick at him and poked, forcing him to step back. "You watch your mouth, elf! I won't have that kind of language in my holler." She poked at him again.

On guard now, Balfour easily sidestepped the frail woman's onslaught. He laughed at her. "Yer holler? I came here when yer great-grandpa did, in 1806. We walked all the way down from what ye call Pennsylvania, through unbroken forest."

He warmed up to his topic. "I'm going to find me an elf-maiden one of these days, and raise a family here. If I can find an elf-maiden, that is. Haven't seen nary one in these parts for thirty years. Now if yer polite, *maybe* we'll let ye stay here."

The woman's head jerked, and her filmy eyes stared over his shoulder. He whirled around to see what was sneaking up behind him.

Whack! A blazing pain stung his shoulder. He turned back toward the old woman, who grinned with satisfaction and hefted her stick hesitantly for another strike.

He opened his mouth to curse her, but anger made him so incoherent the words wouldn't come out. The stinkpot! No human dare hit an elf! Finally he yelled, "I'll be here long after you turn into worm-rot! Which won't be long now if you raise that stick to me agin, old woman." He pointed at her, and his fingers glowed faintly.

She lowered her stick, but not her chin. "You won't be *here* much longer, elf. The government's coming to tear it up."

Tear it up. He recalled the last time the Forest Service had harvested these slopes, 70 years ago. They'd left an ugly mess reminiscent of the elf-troll wars he'd seen as a child in Eire, but it wasn't permanent. "I can wait it out," he said. "Move from cove to cove; by the time they finish cutting one end of the mountain the other will have done grown up agin. They can't cut it all at once." It wouldn't leave a very attractive homesite for a prospective bride, though.

The old woman laughed bitterly. "Oh, they're not just going to cut the trees this time. No sir. First they'll cut the trees, then they'll dig up half the mountain for the limestone rock, and they'll haul the rock down to the mouth of Payne Valley. They're going to dam up the whole valley, make a great big lake for the fishermen. All this will be under water right up to the edge of the mountain," she added.

They stood silently in the starlight.

When the shock wore off, he asked, "When will they start?"

"They've already started, down at Clinker's Cove." Mrs. McGlowry's posture sagged even further than normal. "It don't matter that much," she whispered. "I can't keep this place up anymore. The roof is sagging, and the porch is a death-trap. I used to have the most beautiful cream-and-yellow roses along the front porch that my man Eiland planted the year 'fore he died, and now look at it. It's just a bunch of weeds." A tear squeezed out of one milky eye and zigzagged down the runnels on her cheek.

She roused herself. "You pick up my outhouse, you hear me?" Her voice quavered. "I'm old, I can't do it no more."

Balfour felt himself squirm under the human's stare. Finally she turned and hobbled back toward the house.

He let her go. No one was going to listen to an old woman babbling about an elf.

A tiny voice from his subconscious whispered that maybe he couldn't stop her if he wanted to. He stomped the voice flat and sent it scurrying home.

I don't ***have*** *to do this*, he told himself as he straightened up the outhouse. *Who does she think she is, telling me what to do?*

He shut the little building's door and gave the wooden stop a quarter turn to latch it. Then he strode off toward the top of the hollow. They weren't about to flood *his* home, not if he could help it.

Three weeks later, Balfour was less confident. He wiped the perspiration from his face onto his green neckerchief. Climbing these steep slopes, even in the wan sunlight of early November, was enough to make an elf sweat. Satisfied that the two loggers sitting on the freshly fallen scarlet oak trunk were adequately glammed, Balfour rose from behind the stump they had left and sauntered past their inattentive eyes to stand in back of them. Nearby, the yellow-orange behemoth with which they cut and loaded the trees continued to puke particulates during their lunch break.

"Ernie's gonna clean his clock," declared the brown-bearded man on Balfour's right.

The red-head to his left rebutted, "You're full of it. He ain't good enough to change Rusty's tires," and turned away to spit his contempt onto the forest floor. Balfour balled up a fist and smashed the red-head on the shoulder blade, then ducked back out of the way. The red-head grunted with pain, turned around to stare at the bearded one, and knocked the sandwich out of his coworker's hand. The sandwich landed in the dirt.

While the two humans were busy pounding each other, Balfour climbed up on the rig. Padded gloves and stolen child's shoes kept the pain from the harsh metal to a level he could bear. One by one, he opened the fuel caps, inserted a slender willow rod and muttered a few words.

Diesel fuel wasn't milk, and sour-to-sweet was a more difficult charm than sweet-to-sour, but about the time the two men tired of fighting, the sugar in the fuel brought the machine to a sputtering stop.

Balfour trudged toward home. For two weeks he'd disabled their machines, even after the loggers had posted guards at night and set up portable spotlights. But keeping up with them all was running him ragged. A week ago Wednesday he'd taken a day off to travel to Damascus, tracking

Illuminated capitals by Margaret Davis

down a rumor of marriageable elves in a small tract of forest near the Tennessee line. The rumor had proven to be wishful thinking on his brethren's part. Every elf he met had heard of elf-maidens living somewhere else. When he'd returned to Smyth County the next day, another 400 acres were cut clean from the mountain. The humans' ability to harvest lumber had grown like a troll's appetite since the days of the two-man cross-cut saws. They hadn't reached his cove yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time.

The rumble of another machine starting up came to his drooping ears from the west, and he veered wearily in that direction. He hadn't gone forty paces when yet another roar came from the south. Balfour's legs refused to continue. The last glimmer of light left his hazel eyes, and his face slackened. His shoulders sagged. Finally he sighed and resumed his original course toward the hollow and home.

He plodded past Mrs. McGlowry's place, keeping well away from the outhouse.

A voice came from her window.

"Elf! Hey, Elf! Come over here. I want to talk with you."

Now she could see him even in daylight. What was next, her glamming him?

He skipped the missing board on the porch and slipped inside, keeping a sharp eye for the woman's stick as she let the door slap shut behind him.

"Sit down over here, away from the stove," she said. He heeded her instructions. The cast iron coal stove was nearly cold, but he could feel the iron stinging until he scooted to the far end of the couch. He peered into her eyes. Unless he was imagining things, something was different, her eyes were clearer or her glasses were bigger.

She said, "Oh, I see you alright. I had surgery on my cataracts last week, and I tell you it made a world of difference. I hadn't seen the real world this well in years. I see some other things better, too," she added pointedly. "But don't worry, I won't tell anyone, they'd think I was quaar. Do you want some milk and cookies?"

"Milk and cookies?" he sputtered. "Yew think just because I'm an elf..."

She cut him off. "Would you rather be proud and hungry? You look like you could use a good meal."

Balfour's stomach took that untimely opportunity to rumble like a coal mine caving in.

Mrs. McGlowry said, "Heh," and disappeared into the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later and two pounds heavier, Balfour asked Mrs. McGlowry what she wanted with him.

She tilted her head toward the window, where the drone of diesel machinery echoing off the hillsides occasionally wafted inside. "Have you had any luck stopping the loggers?"

"No. There's too many. No sooner do I stop one machine than they bring in two more."

"Why don't you just make them run their machines off the mountain and into the river, or quit their jobs, or something like that?"

Balfour squirmed. He wasn't supposed to discuss the glamour with humans, yet he felt almost compelled to do so.

"It don't work like that. We can change some things, like milk to vinegar, or old shoes to new. And we can make humans forget things, and stop them from seeing us. Most humans," he qualified, glaring at her.

She ignored his allusion.

"Elf, I want...oh, that's rude of me. What's your name, anyhow?"

"Balfour is all ye need to know."

"I'm Brenda McGlowry."

She continued, "I want you to come to Washington with me. There's some people you ought to meet, who might be able to help us."

He shook his head. "I don't reckon your government will talk with someone they can't see. Besides, I can't ride in a car for eight hours, even if I don't touch the metal."

"My grandson has a car that's all aluminum and fiberglass. Or at least most of it. And you *can* let normal people see you when you want to, don't tell me you can't."

He squirmed. She was right. But what good would it do?

The buzz of machinery on the hillside grew a little louder. On the other hand, he thought, it couldn't do much harm to humor her.

He had them enthralled now, he knew. Not literally, but all five top officers of the Wildlife Conservancy League were leaning forward, gazing intently, hoping to discover how he had done the few tricks that proved he wasn't human, and secretly hoping they couldn't. Disappear before the eyes of someone staring at you from three feet away and he or she got the idea pretty quickly. Fade from one person's view when the others could still see you, and soon the loner was clamoring to have the privilege restored.

Robin Byrd said, "Mrs. McGlowry, and Mr. Balfour..."

"Just Balfour."

"...and Balfour, if everything you've told us is true, I would almost be positive we could pull it off." Looking at Balfour, she continued, "While you're not actually 'wildlife' in our usual meaning of the word, you're definitely not human..."

"Durn right, I'm not."

"...and I'd really like to help you." She leaned back in the soft leather cushion, her lips twisted sourly.

"But," prompted Mrs. McGlowry.

"But our own esteemed Senator from Virginia, McWilliams, has the Fish and Wildlife Service so scared he'll kill its funding that they aren't about to take any action without his approval. And he wouldn't let *us* in his office to shine his shoes, much less to plead our case. Normally, we'd try to drum up grassroots support from our members to pressure him, but in your case, of course, you can't afford the publicity."

Balfour grinned at her. "If ye can get me to Senator McWilliams' office without being run over by two tons of cold iron, I can get us in to see him."

"But how will you convince him..."

Balfour chuckled, a gravelly rumble that came from deep within his belly, and Robin Byrd shivered. Mrs. McGlowry just smiled knowingly.

At the outer foyer in the suite where McWilliams' office was located, the

Illuminated capitals by Margaret Davis

receptionist looked intently past them with an air of pure professionalism.

Mrs. McGlowry waved her hand back and forth in front of the receptionist's eyes to no avail. The WCL members ooh'ed and ah'ed until Balfour kicked one of them in the shin. Silently they followed him as he opened the door to the inner sanctum.

Three men and a woman sat around the polished walnut table, drinking and eating with care for their five-hundred dollar suits. They turned as they heard the quiet footsteps of the humans who followed Balfour. With a wave of his hand the elf stilled three of them. The closest one's fork halted in mid-air, then slowly straightened like a hydraulic lift being released until it hung limply at her side. A slice of spicy baked ham slid off the fork and smeared the plush carpet.

"This is a private meeting," Senator McWilliams blustered.

He scooted back from the table to reach for the intercom on the desk behind him.

Balfour sprang into the air, landed on his feet on the desk, and stomped McWilliams' hand before it reached the intercom button.

Now the Senator was paying attention. Balfour said, "Listen up, fatso. Here's the deal. I'm an elf. You're going to call the head of the Fish and Wildlife Service and tell him to have elves listed as an endangered species. Then you're going to call the Army Corps of Engineers and have the Payne Valley project halted."

McWilliams' face reddened, but he kept his voice under control. "Boy," he said, "your parents left you out in the sun too long. Sooner or later, somebody's going to notice that I'm stuck in here, and they'll haul you off for 'observation' at a State Hospital. It could be a long time before you're cured." He reached for another sandwich and took a bite.

Balfour faded out of view, causing the Senator to cough for a moment.

But he wasn't convinced. "Parlor tricks," he said.

Still invisible, Balfour walked across the table to stand astride the Senator's plate. Pressing his right index finger against the inside of his thumb, he raised his hand next to the Senator's nose and flicked it.

"Yee-ouch!" yelled the Senator. He swung a wild roundhouse punch into the empty air in front of him. Balfour dodged it easily.

The Senator said to the air, "You can't intimidate me, elf." His voice shook a little as he continued, "This old boy's done been beat on by the best, and I ain't going to change my vote for no little runt like you."

He raised the sandwich to his mouth.

Arms akimbo on the far corner of the desk, Balfour glared at him. If fear wouldn't work, he'd try something else. He waved his hands toward the Senator.

As McWilliams' mouth came down on the sandwich, the meat between the bread squealed loudly. The sandwich fell to the table and the Senator turned pale, pushing his chair back until it was about to tip over. On the table, the ham organized itself into a miniature pig five inches long that ran across the plate toward the Senator and sprang into the air with its sharp teeth aimed for the big man's nose.

McWilliams' chair toppled over backwards, and the mini-pig missed. It landed on its feet on the carpet and began a mad dash toward the door. Before it got there, though, it seemed to run out of steam and slowed, then stopped. Finally it dissolved, reforming into the sliced Smithfield ham from which it had originated.

McWilliams vomited voraciously. The WCL members were luckier, since they hadn't had lunch yet.

Balfour reappeared and hopped off the table, landing on McWilliams' paunch with both feet. The Senator heaved more ham. The elf shook his finger in the Senator's face.

"I'll be here every day and every night and no one can see me or stop me, fat boy. Yer a big man; I can tell ye like yer vittles. It would be a shame if ye never managed to finish another meal." Balfour grinned. "I can make it look worse than this did."

The Senator waved resignedly at the phone. "Alright, alright. Let me up."

It was well after midnight when the crowd of civil servants stood up to leave McWilliams' office. Balfour and friends had watched in awe as the Senator wielded a barrage of verbal carrots and sticks, finally convincing both agencies to halt the development and add to The List the new fungus *Auricularia mcglowrii*, or McGlowry's Big-Ear, that the Senator's "confidential assistant" had shown them. Later, all the humans would for the most part forget the irregular process that they had followed. As they were walking out the door, the assistant pulled one biologist aside. "I need ye to do one more thing for me," said Balfour.

Only the buzz of honeybees and the tinkle of a wood thrush disturbed the silence as Brenda McGlowry led the Fish and Wildlife Service biologist and his shrouded companion along the wooded creek up the slope into Balfour's cove.

The companion was hidden by cloak, wimple, veil, and gloves, showing no skin, which piqued Brenda's curiosity. Still, she could sense it was an elf, and surely the visitor would doff the disguise once he realized there were no urban crowds here to stress his powers of glamour.

They reached a spot that the biologist said looked right. She glanced around, and felt herself slowing, losing her ability to concentrate. The biologist was already stiff as stone. She concentrated harder, calling "Balf...." One last attempt brought no sound from her throat and she stopped resisting, frozen in place with a frown on her face.

Rowena removed her human raiment, revealing a female elf in her mid-200s, dressed in functional blouse and pants both coated with microscopic scales more brilliant than those of any butterfly. From the rhododendron which had concealed him Balfour stepped forward, as enthralled hormonally as the two humans were physically. He stared.

"Fly's on your tongue," Rowena observed.

He blushed and spat out the fly, and invited her to sit opposite him on the limestone outcropping.

Rowena explained, "After the Rift of the twenties most of us women had moved to a few deep forests for healing. We didn't notice the sudden growth of the short-lifers' automobile traffic, with all the iron vehicles and guard rails, until it was too late. By then so much forest had been cleared

Illuminated capitals by Margaret Davis

that we were isolated from most of the men. Not that everyone minded that, you know."

He nodded, mesmerized.

Rowena said, "Now that the human government is going to protect more of the forest, and a few of them will unknowingly help us travel, more of us will be moving back your part of the world." She smiled at him.

He reached over and squeezed her knee.

Crack!

When the stars cleared, he looked up at her from where he lay on the ground.

She said, "Were you raised in a barn? No, I take that back; the elves I know who were raised in barns have better manners than that. When we learned you had taught the human biologist the Signs and the Sightings that let him find our homes, a lot of the People wanted to have you Sent On. You're just lucky that cooler heads prevailed. Since you had told the biologist you wanted to meet a woman, I volunteered to keep an eye on you to make sure you didn't reveal any more secrets."

He muttered, "Yew ain't quite the kind of elf-maiden I had my mind set on."

"And that's another thing. Whether I'm a 'maiden' is none of your business, for now."

For now. At least she wasn't closing the door forever. "If ye'll be staying here for a while, maybe we can talk, and get to know each other." He watched her reaction cautiously.

"I suspect I'll be here for quite a while." She grinned, and extended a hand to help him up.

The silence grew uncomfortable.

The two elves felt a presence and looked around, but saw nothing unusual. If they had looked closer, they might have noticed that Mrs. McGlowry's expression had melded into a slight smile.

Rowena asked, "What are we going to do with them?"

"We'll send the government man back with false memories of the path he took, and the feeling that he done good. There's something else I want to do for Brenda." He told her, and she offered to help.

The following Sunday, Brenda McGlowry stomped home from the Creekside Pentecostal Church, her walking stick rapping angrily along the macadam. She shouldn't have let Sarah talk her into going in the first place. That fool of a preacher was so smug and self-righteous, claiming that every person with special powers had gotten them from the Devil. What did he know, anyway?

By the time she reached the trail that led into the hollow, her bile had mostly boiled off. As the clearing where her house stood came into view, she stopped. Her stick dropped onto the weeds at her feet.

Every board gleamed a brilliant white, except the porch trim was now deep emerald green. The old tin roof sparkled like new silver, and the missing boards on the porch had been replaced. She squinted, and snatched her stick off the ground. Rushing to the front of the porch, she stared. There in the fresh mulch were three thorny stubs just poking out of the ground. Rose bushes, and on one there had opened up, despite the wintry air, a dainty cream-and-yellow bloom.

Hidden in the edge of the woods, two elves smiled at one another, regretting that they had had to make her forget them. Their pleasure turned to amazement when her thought reached them: "Forget, my backside."

❄

Dan Guynn, Jr., has previously sold to *BirdWatcher's Digest*, *Ranger Rick*, *Highlights for Children*, and *Guide*. His primary occupation other than writing is reading , but in his "spare time" he works with state and federal agencies in conservation-related causes.

Margaret Davis is a singer, musician, and illustrator from Oakland, CA.

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The Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- 1st Place: **"United Powers" by Kathleen M. Massie-Ferch**
- 2nd Place: **"Sphinx in the Mind" by Karen Anderson**
- 3rd Place: **"Which She Was" by Jennifer Schwabach**

Artwork:

- 1st Place: **Alan Gutierrez for "Serpent Within"**
- 2nd Place: **Michael Kucharski for "United Powers"**
- 3rd Place: **Rob Alexander for "Snow Like Wool, Frost Like Ashes"**

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THIMBLEFUL OF MAGIC

by Carrie Martin

Sadey climbed into the carriage after her younger sister Meg and sat next to her older sister Polly. The driver shut the door behind her and a moment later they were bumping over the cobblestones. Sadey frowned. "I don't see why we have to travel two whole days to say goodbye to someone we never even met."

Her mother shook her head reprovingly. "Your father's great-aunt Matty wrote expressly asking us to come. Poor thing. She's probably not long for this world. It would be terribly impolite to refuse a relative's last request, Sadey."

"Besides," said Polly, giving her a nudge, "she said she had presents for all of us. You wouldn't want to miss that."

Sadey sighed, kicking her foot idly against the seat and staring out the window. Of course Polly would be interested in the presents. She always got exactly what she wanted, and everything she got was new, because she was the oldest. Meg always got what she wanted because she was the youngest, and everyone knew it was bad luck not to spoil the baby. Sadey got everything Polly had outgrown. Shoes, dresses, toys. No sense in throwing something away if there was still some use in it, and no sense buying Sadey something new if Polly's old things would do. The presents Sadey got were always useful, sensible things. Stockings, underclothes, pencils to do her schoolwork.

They traveled all day and spent the night at an inn. The room had two beds in it. Sadey's mother slept in one, naturally, and little Meg, being the youngest and frightened of strange places, cuddled next to her. Polly got the other bed, being the oldest. They brought a folding cot for Sadey. Sadey tried to get comfortable, knowing she wouldn't be successful. She lay awake a long time, trying not to cry. Crying never helped. Either no one noticed, or someone scolded, telling her she was much too big to cry over something so silly. Middle children had to be sensible.

They arrived at great-aunt Matty's house late the next afternoon. Great-aunt Matty had white hair that wisped around her head like little clouds, and a face that was nothing but wrinkles upon wrinkles. Sadey didn't think she had any teeth left. She was sitting up in bed, propped up with beautifully embroidered pillows, and covered with a quilt that told the entire story of Jack

the Giant-Killer in cunningly stitched pictures.

"Thank you for coming to say goodbye," said the old woman. "My gift to my nephew's wife is in the trunk at the foot of the bed." Sadey's mother smiled and opened the trunk, her eyes widening as she lifted the beautiful shawl great-aunt Matty had made for her.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, and threw the shawl about her shoulders. "How can I ever thank you for such a lovely gift?"

The old woman shook with laughter. "I had a good time making it, dear. My present to Polly is in the wardrobe over there."

Polly ran to open the wardrobe, squealing with delight when she saw the dress great-aunt Matty had made for her. It was the same shade of blue as her eyes, and obviously a perfect fit. She held the dress to her and danced about the room. "It's wonderful," she sang, and danced over to kiss great-aunt Matty's withered cheek. "Thank you a thousand thousand times."

Great-aunt Matty shook her head, smiling. "My pleasure, dear. Little Meg's present is in the cupboard."

Meg ran to the cupboard, unable to utter a word when she saw the beautiful doll. She lifted it out, hands trembling as she smoothed the pink sheen of the doll's skirts. She clutched the doll to her chest and ran to hug great-aunt Matty. "Yes, dear," said the old woman, patting her. "I'm glad you like it."

Great-aunt Matty fixed a cloudy blue eye on Sadey. "I've saved the best for last. Will you fetch the box in the top drawer of the bureau, Sadey?"

Sadey opened the drawer, her heart pounding. Could great-aunt Matty really be giving her the best present? Her eyes widened when she saw the box, a curious piece made of ivory and jade. She lifted it carefully and carried it to the bed.

Great-aunt Matty opened the box. "Give me your hand, Sadey." The girl held out her hand and the old woman popped a little cap of metal onto her middle finger. Sadey's mouth opened in disbelief. The old woman winked. "It's my thimble, Sadey. My great-grandmother gave it to me, and it was the best present I ever received in all my life." She clutched Sadey's hand with trembling fingers. "You'll take good care of it, won't you?"

Sadey's eyes stung with disappointed tears. Crazy old woman. How could she think any girl would want a battered, tarnished old piece of metal? Sadey looked into the old eyes and realized how badly the woman wanted her gift to be appreciated. It wasn't so much to ask, after all. The poor woman was dying and Sadey had a wide experience with disappointment. She summoned up a smile and leaned to put her arms around the woman. "I'll treasure it always," she promised.

Sadey turned the thimble over and over in her hand on the journey home, examining the pattern worn almost smooth by many years of use. "She was probably senile," said Sadey's mother. "You can borrow my shawl if you like, Sadey." Her fingers tightened on the shawl, however, and Sadey knew she didn't really want to lend it.

"You can borrow my dress," said Polly. Sadey shook her head. It wouldn't fit her now. She'd get it when Polly outgrew it anyway.

"Do you want to play with my doll?" asked Meg fearfully.

Sadey smiled. "No thank you, Meg. I suppose, now that I've got a thimble, I'd better learn how to sew."

Her mother's brows rose. "My goodness, Sadey. There's no need to carry the joke that far."

Sadey slipped her finger into the thimble. It felt comfortable, natural. There was something strangely exciting about it. "I want to, Mother. I think it might be fun to learn how to make pretty things."

She started the moment she got home. Sadey felt sure the thimble did more than protect her from pricking herself. It seemed as though the thimble guided the needle, inventing beautiful patterns and putting ideas into Sadey's head. She never told anyone that, of course. But gradually the townspeople began to come to her. Dancers swore they never danced so gracefully as in the slippers Sadey stitched. Bakers declared they couldn't make anything but the most delicious pies and cakes if they wore an apron Sadey had made. Parents came for christening gowns, young men came for shirts to wear while proposing, young women came for bridal gowns. There was something lucky about the creations that flowed from Sadey's fingers, and whispers of magic surrounded the young seamstress.

Sadey wasn't entirely pleased about that. It kept her busy, naturally, for everyone wanted a piece of luck and was willing to pay for it. But she knew the polite smiles held a trace of fear. The best magic casts dark shadows, the townspeople whispered to each other. Who knew what might happen if Sadey were accidentally offended? Better not run the risk of becoming overfamiliar, they agreed. The more popular Sadey became, the lonelier she felt.

Sadey's fame as a seamstress grew, and one day a golden carriage rolled to a stop at the front door and a page in royal livery bowed low as he handed Sadey a letter. She broke the seal and opened the heavy vellum, paling as she read. The king's daughter was to be married, and Sadey's services were kindly requested. However gently phrased, a king's request was nothing short of command, and half an hour later Sadey climbed into the carriage, her hastily packed trunk strapped to the back, where it looked sadly out of place. Sadey felt every bit as shabby as her trunk when they arrived at the king's castle and she was deposited in an impossibly grand room.

A young man wearing an engaging grin bounced in a moment later and settled himself comfortably in the windowseat without so much as a by your leave. "You're the magic seamstress, aren't you?"

Sadey frowned. "I never said I was magic."

He laughed. "Nobody cares whether you say it or not. You'd better come up with something, though."

She sank into the nearest chair, wondering what she'd gotten herself into. "What will they do to me?"

He shrugged. "You can never tell with kings. This isn't a happy situation, however."

Sadey chewed her lip nervously. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, the prince who's going to marry the king's daughter wanted his young-

Vote for your favorites — Cauldron ballot on p. 64

est, most beautiful daughter instead. Royals have to think about treaties rather than personal preference, you understand, and this king decided long ago his four daughters would be married off according to age, so this one's got to go before the last one does. The princess isn't pretty to begin with and she's cried enough the last month to make her look like a hag. The king wants a dress that'll make the prince overlook her face, I suppose."

Sadey jumped angrily to her feet. "Men! You're all so shallow and — and unsympathetic. You don't care a bit how the poor princess feels."

He gave her a wry grin. "Don't I just. I'm supposed to cast a spell on the prince to make him forget the princess he wanted. Never mind I haven't got a clue how to do it, especially since she's got to attend the wedding herself because she's the bride's sister."

Sadey sat down again, her brow furrowing. "Are you a magician?"

He jumped up, holding out his hand. "I'm Bernard the Banausic. You can call me Bernie if you'd like."

"Banausic?"

He laughed. "Sounds fearsome, doesn't it? It actually means non-intellectual, mundane, every-day this and that. The sorcerer who tutored me said I'd have to work day and night to achieve mediocrity. He had to name me something, and after dubbing my older brother Marvin the Magnificent, and my younger brother Peter the Petrifying, what could he do but find something nobody knew the meaning of?"

Sadey smiled, but she was beginning to feel ill. "The king expects the two of us to make this wedding a happy one?"

He sprawled in the windowseat again. "That's about the size of it. I was completely depressed until I heard you were coming."

Her mouth dropped open. "I don't know what you've heard, but —"

He jumped up and dropped to his knees before her, taking her hands in his. "I've heard about your particular magic, Sadey. Make me a cloak. Maybe it'll help me cast better spells. If I can make the prince forget the younger princess, and you can make the bride a dress that shows how sweet she is —"

"Is she sweet?"

He grinned. "I'll say. She knows how inept I am and still wants me to be her court magician because we're friends. She may not be beautiful, but the prince is getting a bargain. We just have to make him see the truth."

Sadey's eyes dropped to her lap, where Bernie's fingers were still intertwined with hers. She flushed. "Does she love him?"

"Absolutely. That all-encompassing, never-ending, do or die type. How about it? Will you make me a cloak?"

She raised her eyes to his and felt herself drowning in them. She suddenly knew exactly how the princess felt. Bernie was the one she'd been waiting for, and she wasn't pretty or graceful or clever enough to make him fall in love with her. He was only interested in combining their skills so an angry king wouldn't take his head off.

"Let me get your measurements." If he felt her fingers trembling as they brushed over his shoulders and arms, he said nothing about it. He only gave her a brisk kiss in thanks when she was finished and bounced out as unceremoniously as he'd come in.

Sadey went through several piles of fabric in the sewing room before she found what she wanted. She sat, stroking her hand across a dark plush piece that looked black, but glimmered reddish brown in some lights and purplish blue in others. The finger wearing the thimble throbbed gently, and she imagined Bernie turning, the cloak swirling dramatically around him, as he pulled impossible things out of the air. She smiled through her tears as she cut the fabric. She'd never embarrass him by telling him how she felt, but the thimble was giving her the opportunity to see that Bernie would spend every day for the rest of his life cloaked in love. Her stitches were perfect and sure, the thimble guiding her placement of hidden folds and pockets that began gathering magic from the air before the stitching was half done. Her beloved would have to live a long time to discover the wealth hidden within its folds.

She finished, and buried her face in the dark fabric, feeling Bernie's future rolling out before her. The cloak would settle around his shoulders and call forth his latent talent. He'd make a name for himself in the princess's new kingdom. Better still, Sadey could feel his future happiness. Her heart ached, knowing how far he'd be from her, but she was glad. Great-aunt Matty had given her the best present after all.

It was a remarkable wedding. Bernie, wearing his new cloak, decided the prince needed a spell to improve his memory rather than one to spark forgetfulness. The bride appeared in a beautiful gown that somehow revealed her inner generosity, her calm strength, her abiding love. The prince was shaken, and suddenly realized his narrow escape as Bernie's spell reminded him of his former love's temper tantrums, her selfishness, her inability to see beyond his own handsome physique.

The ceremony was followed by a merry celebration with feasting, dancing and singing. Bernie was at his most charming as he entertained the new royal couple with magic tricks. Women clustered about him with smiling congratulations afterward, and Sadey quietly slipped away.

It only took a few moments to pack her belongings into her trunk. She stood

at the window, her eyes on the fork in the road half a mile from the castle. Tomorrow she'd be taking the right, returning to her parents' home. Bernie would take the left, traveling to new adventures as a court magician.

She turned at the sound of the door. Bernie tossed the cloak on the bed and came to stand behind her. "You already thanked me, Bernie."

He chuckled. "And it would be uncivil to mention it again?"

"There's no need." She kept her eyes firmly on the road outside, hoping she wouldn't cry until after he'd left.

"Have you ever made something really special for yourself, Sadey?"

She clasped her hands together. "I make all my own clothes."

His breath tickled her ear. "That's not what I meant. Is it too big a secret?"

Sadey turned to look at him, falling in love all over again as his eyes met hers. She'd never be able to deny him anything he asked. She stepped to her trunk, lifting out a bundle. "My great-aunt Matty gave me her thimble. That's the thing that's magic, Bernie." She set the package on the bed and opened it with trembling fingers. She smoothed a hand over the christening gown inside. "This is for my great-granddaughter Sharon. Don't ask me how I know, but she's the one I'll give the thimble to."

Bernie sat on the bed, his fingers tracing the intricate embroidery around the neck of the tiny gown. "Three generations away. I guess we'd better get started." He pulled her into his lap, his lips brushing against hers.

She struggled against him. "But you don't — You can't —"

He laughed, pulling her closer. "Don't be silly. At my most banausic I had the wit to see the most important thing in my life coming days before you got here. What do you think? My new prince says we can dispense with the banns, and the priest isn't drunk enough yet that he can't read the words right."

Sadey threw her arms around him, thinking how lovely being the seamstress wife of a mediocre magician would be, living in a castle with a plain princess married to a handsome prince who luckily had been disappointed in his choice of a bride. "I think it sounds wonderful. Can we have a lot of children?"

Her future husband kissed her soundly. "We can have as many as you like. Do you want boys or girls?"

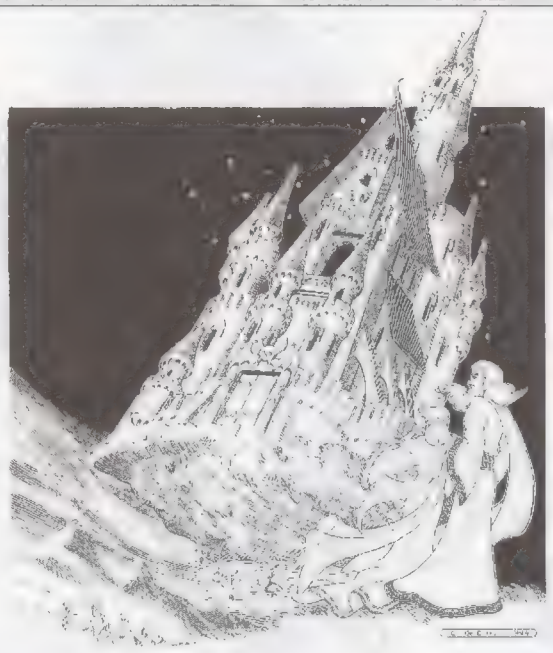
"I don't care in the least. Just give me plenty of middle children. They seem to have the best luck in the end."

❄

Carrie Martin works as a secretary for the New York State Department of Transportation, "where I correct other people's grammar and spelling all day". (We can sympathize.) She shares her life with two teenagers and a cat and notes, "The kids are supportive of my writing, constantly inventing fictional tales of their own, and generous to a fault in creating new and unexpected ways to spend any profits. The cat has no opinion on literary efforts, but frequently offers her services as a paperweight." This is her second sale to *MZB's FM* and she has had stories accepted for publication by *Aboriginal*, *Aberrations*, *Next Phase*, and *Lords of Eternal Darkness* (Sirius Publications).

Margaret Organ-Kean works as a tech writer and systems analyst in addition to her artwork assignments from *Cricket*, *MZBFM*, and Wizards of the Coast (where she illustrated cards in the MAGIC deck, and was the artist and designer for all cards in The Great Dalmuti).

Where to find it:
Subscription form: p. 63.
Back issues: p. 57.
T-shirts: p. 61.



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The artwork on the front is George Barr's line drawing of a flying castle, based on the cover of issue #1. The back lists every artist and author published and/or interviewed in the first twenty-five issues. Printed in white on a heavyweight black Tshirt, sizes M - L - XL - XXL. Other sizes by request. These make great gifts! $16.95 includes shipping and handling within the U.S. (Canada: $1.50 additional. Please make checks payable in U.S. funds.)

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The Last Word

My wish for 1997 is that it will indeed be a happy new year for each and every one of you, and I hope this issue will help you while away one or two cold winter nights.

There will be wonderful stories and artwork for you in 1997: covers by Alicia Austin and Vincent DiFate, for example, and stories by Mary Aldridge (our only Nebula nominee — so far) and India Edghill, sister of Rosemary Edghill (better known to our readers by her real name, eluki bes shahar), Carrie Martin, Steven Piziks, Susan Shwartz, Deborah Wheeler, and Darrell Schweitzer (an extremely funny story, I might add). "Green Man" by Richard Calantropio is about a man protecting his neighborhood; "Wallan's Sanity Test" by Carl Bowen will tickle your funny bone. Cynthia McQuillin has contributed an excellent new story called "Whistle the Wind", and Julia Watts offers advice to "Those Who Would Be King". Russell William Asplund sold us a story based on the German myth cycle, "Der Ring of the Nibelungen". We have two stories from Laura Underwood awaiting you, and one by Janna Silverstein (former editor at Wizards of the Coast). Lee Martindale has sold stories to Sword and Sorceress, but I think this is the first time she's had a story scheduled for the magazine. All in all, we have some terrific stories coming up, so get set for some good reading!

George Barr was surprised at how close to horror our cover story was for this issue. But Marion and I both felt "Thin Man" was an extremely powerful story with an optimistic ending. So we hope you enjoyed it even as you shivered.

As usual, the artists have outdone themselves for us: George's illustrations for "Thin Man" were done on dark-colored paper to emphasize the mood of the story and the settings mostly in badly-lit spaces. And his drawing for "The Three Tasks" is simply delightful; in fact, I think I'm going to try and purchase it from him as a gift for a friend. (The "curse" of this job is that I fall in love with so much of the

artwork and want to own it, or to buy it for presents.)

Our "centerfold" story this issue is from a writer new to us: Adele Turner. Funny, one of *my* English teachers was named Jorgenson, at University High School in Los Angeles. Luckily I did well in her class; the most cutting thing she ever said to me was that I had "accidentally" managed to arrange the arguments in my essay on Rabelais in the most effective order—accidentally, my **foot**!

Assigning the artwork is one of my favorite tasks. Didn't you just love the quarreling wizards on page 18, and Margaret Davis's cute illuminated capitals for "Hillbilly Charm"? Both Lori Deitrick and Margaret Organ-Kean borrowed costume themes from the English Regency for their drawings.

Speaking of the Regency, I am a huge fan of Regency dancing, which I became acquainted with at science fiction conventions. Then I discovered that on the west coast, there was an annual (more or less) "Assembly" held; this year's will be March 7-9 at a charmingly (and uniquely) decorated Buena Park Holiday Inn, near Disneyland. Last year's assembly included lots of dancing (my favorite partner was the dance instructor's son, who was about nine, and utterly self-possessed), an excellent lecture on fabrics and resources available to those wishing to recreate Regency fashions, a Jane Austen reading, and the Assembly's traditional showing of a "silly costume film". Previous assemblies have had madeira tastings, lectures on gems and jewelry of the period (where I learned about "rose cut diamonds"), the etiquette of fans (the ones made of paper, or silk, or feathers...), and hat workshops. If you enjoy "live" fantasy as well as stories about it, contact John Hertz for more information about this year's Regency Assembly: his mailing address is 236 S. Coronado St. #409, Los Angeles CA 90057. And Seattleites are invited to my Regency dance class at NorWesCon at the end of March.

The last page of each issue of this magazine is always a ballot which allows readers to vote for their favorite stories and artists. Winners of the Cauldron awards receive a certificate and a small payment. This issue, we've added some questions intended to give you a wider opportunity for feedback to us. Answer as many or as few questions as you like, and send in the ballot to register your opinions. (If you dislike cutting up magazines, a photocopy of the form, or even just a clearly-stated letter, is a perfectly fine substitute.) So let us hear your thoughts.

Letters, just like manuscript submissions, should be written with a fresh, dark ribbon in your typewriter or printer (alternately, select a fairly heavy "stroke weight" for your laser printer) — Marion says she'd like to preserve what eyesight she has left!

And enjoy 1997: it's a brand new year!

— *Rachel Holmen*

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The Cauldron — Issue #34

Story	Artist
❑ **Thin Man** by Steven Piziks	❑ George Barr
❑ **Little Things** by Sherry D. Ramsey	❑ Lori Dietrick
❑ **The Three Tasks** by Huan-Hua Chye	❑ George Barr
❑ **The Bone's Captive Bride** by Jo Clayton	❑ Armand Cabrera
❑ **White Out** by Adele Turner	❑ Julia Lacquement
❑ **The Test** by Max Wright	❑ Jim Balkovek
❑ **Hillbilly Charm** by Dan Guynn, Jr.	❑ Margaret Davis
❑ **Thimbleful of Magic** by Carrie Martin	❑ Margaret Organ-Kean

Questionnaire

In order to better bring you, the readers, the type of first class fantasy magazine you want, we are including a brief questionnaire with this month's Cauldron.

Who are your favorite authors? _____

Artists? _____

What types of stories do you most prefer? _____

Do you prefer any particular genre of fantasy? _____

If you are a already a reader of MZBFM, which stories that we've published have you most liked?

_____

If you are a new reader, what stories, and authors, have you most liked (from other fantasy publications)?

_____

What types of stories would you like to see in our magazine?

_____

What types of artwork would you like to see?

_____

Which artist do you think would best suit MZBFM's style?

_____

Would you like to see more advertising? _____

What kind of advertising and products would you like to see? _____

If you have additional comments and suggestions, list them here or write them on another sheet of paper and send them to us. _____

Only one ballot per reader, please!!!

Vote for your favorite stories and artists, then send the ballot to:

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P.O. Box 249, Berkeley, CA 94701

If you'd rather not tear out this page, a photocopy is fine, or just write your choices LEGIBLY and send us a letter. Mark 1 for first, 2 for second, etc.

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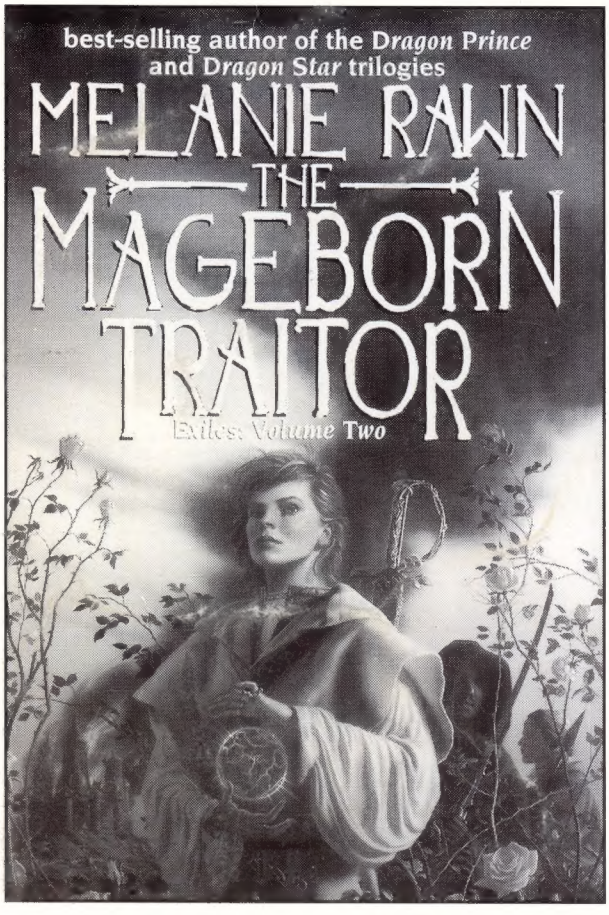
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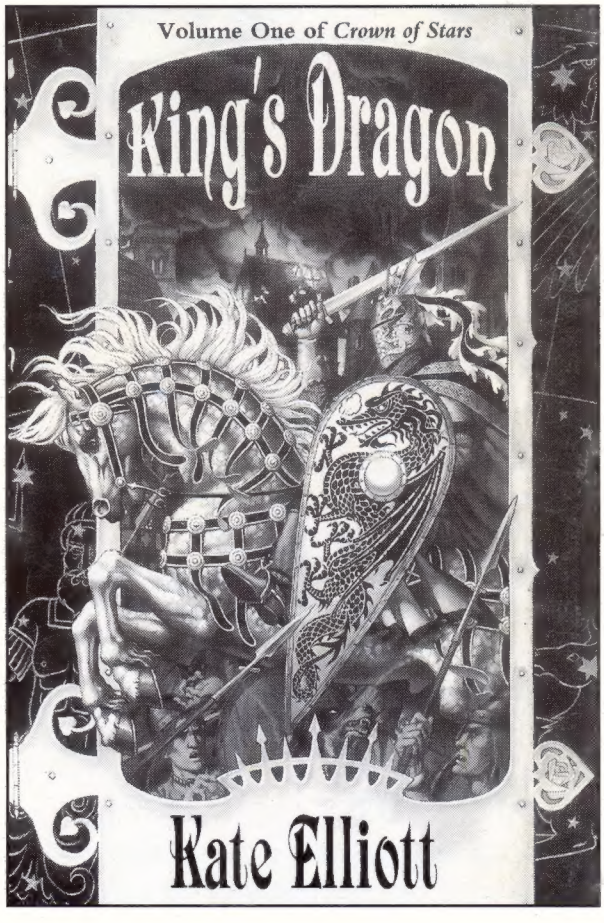

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